# WILD GOD IN THE WILDERNESS: WHY DOES YAHWEH CHOOSE TO APPEAR IN THE WILDERNESS IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS?

by

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**ABSTRACT**:

The wilderness is an unlikely place for Yahweh to appear; yet some of the most profound encounters between Yahweh and ancient Israel occur in this isolated, barren, arid and marginal landscape. Thus, via John A. Beck's narrative-geography method, which prioritises the role of the geographical setting of the biblical narrative, the question of 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' is examined in reference to four Exodus theophanic passages (Exodus 3:1-4:17, 19:1-20:21, 24:9-18 and 33:18-34). First, a biblical working definition of the wilderness is developed, and the specific geographic elements in each passage discussed. Subsequently, the characterisation of Yahweh's appearances is investigated, via the signs Yahweh used to appear, the words Yahweh speaks and the human experience of Yahweh in the wilderness space. In sum, five reasons for why Yahweh appears in the wilderness were considered significant. The wilderness setting allows Yahweh to (1) be actively present and intimately engaged, (2) be separate and holy, (3) be paradoxically creative, (4) speak transformative and visionary words and (5) be free, risky, and provoking. Finally, the implications of these findings provide new insights to theological considerations of Yahweh. Overall, Yahweh is portrayed as a wild God in the wilderness.

**DEDICATION**

To Jesus Christ, the Wildest-One.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: WILDERNESS AND YAHWEH

The wilderness: an arid, dusty and isolated place, uncivilised and undomesticated. This is the most unlikely setting for a god. Yet in the Old Testament (OT),[1] the wilderness is frequently the landscape in which Yahweh[2] draws near in theophanic appearance. In these wilderness theophanies, God engages with people, calls them to a new vocation, proclaims a future rescue and/or is dramatically revealed in a new manner with a new name.[3] The wilderness, a so-called cursed and godforsaken environment, is a location for some of Yahweh's most profound and transformative encounters with ancient Israel recounted in the biblical text. In fact, the wilderness seems to be the preferred location for the theophanies of Yahweh.

Yet within the biblical literature, there is little consideration of the paradox of God being revealed in the remote, inhospitable and threatening landscape of the wilderness. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to explore the overarching question, why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness setting within the biblical text? This

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[1] I have chosen to use the term Old Testament in respect to tradition, both Jewish and Christian, throughout the thesis. I recognise the Hebrew/Jewish roots of Scripture, but I write as a student within the Christian Protestant-Pentecostal tradition that links the Old Testament to the New Testament, and traces the narrative of Jesus Christ in both. In addition, unless specified, biblical translations are my own.

[2] The term Yahweh will be used throughout the thesis, but it is recognised that there are critiques of this translation, such as Hebrew being a constantal language and thus, the pronounciation is unknown, as well as potential disrespect for Jewish readers. Yet overall, 'modern biblical scholarship has agreed to represent this [the Tetragrammaton, YHWH] as "Yahweh"' (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004], xv). Moreover, I am aware that the gender for God is not masculine, and have tried as much as possible to be gender neutral when referencing God. However, to aid in clarity of reading there are times when a pronoun is required, and I have opted to use the masculine pronoun due to traditional convention.

[3] For example, see the narratives of Hagar (Gen 16; 21), Moses (Exod 3), Moses and Israel (Exod 19-20; 33), Elijah (1 Kings 19), Job (Job 38), as well as the prophetic voices of Isaiah (Isaiah 32:1-2; 35:1-2; 41:17-20).

question develops from the hypothesis that the geography of the wilderness setting itself might disclose something of the nature of God. Therefore, this is why Yahweh has chosen to be revealed in this space. That is, the *place* of wilderness is significant. Why else would this place—a barren, desolate, wilderness landscape—be used as a place of divine encounter and theophany?[4]

Therefore, to engage with the research question of 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness setting?' a methodological approach that recognises the priority of geographical elements is required. The subsequent discussion of this introductory chapter will provide (1) a review of the relationship between geography and biblical interpretation as adopted in this study, (2) a review of the importance of geography within biblical interpretation, as well as (3) outline a narrative-geographical method that this research project will use to investigate the research question. Finally, an overview will be provided of how the research project will be outworked in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

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[4] When entering into a project such as a thesis, it is advisable for the person to be aware of why they are drawn to certain concepts and not others. For myself, the themes of wilderness, of place and God's presence are ones that intersect in my imagination. As such this thesis and its exploration will obviously be biased towards these poles. Why might this be? As someone who has a family farm that has been in the immediate family over the last 100 years, and whose parents have resided in the same place since their marriage over 35 years ago, my connection to place is noticeable. I recognise that in these two places – my childhood home and grandparent's farm (where I spent my holidays)—my life, history, fears and loves have been formed. It is from this sense of rootedness and connection, that my spirituality is influenced. I find echoes of this within the OT narratives. Land—its promise, its geography, its threat as well as its loss, are all layered within the momentum of story. No one would deny this. Yet at times in our modern world, the connectedness to space and place has blurred due to technology shrinking previous boundaries, our mobility of travel and the transient nature of what is home. As such, it could be argued that we read texts without acknowledging the role of geography, land and space. This paper, however, wishes to put place and geography back into the equation, in full recognition that it does influence what occurs. Specifically, the geographical place that I want to focus on is 'wilderness'. Those places which are dry, arid and harsh in their make-up. For some reason (which I am sure the process of this thesis paper will clarify for me), the wilderness and its stereotypical ruggedness, wild unpredictability, natural beauty and gut-wrenching silences captures my heart and mind. Further, the paradox of wilderness in the Bible captures me. Why is it that the wilderness, although characterised by the negative voices of murmur, complaint, death and chaos, is contradictorily a place of wonder, transformation and encounter within the biblical tradition? How can this be so? In fact, is it in the place of contradiction and complexity that we can glimpse God afresh?

## 1.2 THE BIBLE AND GEOGRAPHY

To explore Yahweh's theophanic appearances in the wilderness setting, the focus of this thesis will be heavily concentrated on the setting, geography, place and space of the wilderness. As such, an approach to biblical texts that is attentive to the geography of deserts and wastelands is required. Typically, biblical scholars have neglected or skimmed over the role that geography and place have played in a text and its message. Yet this thesis proposes the opposite. It recommends that the geographical setting of the wilderness is significant as a place for momentous encounters with God to occur. Therefore, to establish that the wilderness setting is critical to Yahweh's appearances, a methodology is required that allows for the artistry of the text as well as the geographical setting to be explored. Hence, a methodology that takes the following factors into account is essential. The approach needs to recognise the geographical realities of land, wilderness and place. It must be cognisant of the human shaping that occurs to the wilderness 'place', especially as 'land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience'.[5] In addition, as the encounters with Yahweh are described within the text of the Bible, the method must also account for the Bible's literary nature and how the meaning of geography and the symbol of the wilderness is portrayed therein. As Bar-Efrat nicely summarises, 'Places in the narrative are not merely geographical facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is

[5] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 2.

embodied'.[6] Overall, a method that is conversant with geographical realities, human shaping of places, as well as how biblical literature portrays geography, is essential.

Thus in, the rest of this section, I will review previous ways biblical scholars have regarded geography within the OT, with the end result to propose a methodology that will best suit the thesis discussion of Yahweh's appearance in the wilderness.

### 1.2.1 The Bible and Geography: An Overlooked Discussion

To begin, what becomes evident in reviewing the scholarship of geography and the biblical text, is that generally, biblical scholars have downplayed or ignored the role of place and geography in the biblical text. Instead, scholarship has focused largely on the aspects of time, history and humanity, neglecting the geographical and/or setting elements and how this contributes to the literary message. This can be attributed to a combination of various factors.

First, the setting of a text is arguably overlooked due to the heavy emphasis on historical-critical readings that has dominated modern biblical scholarship. In these readings, the emphasis is typically on temporality over space. Although it should be noted that this interpretative focus is not limited to the biblical discipline. As even within literary modernism, writers have prioritised time over place, as they locate themselves in history and in time, over and above space.[7] Yet, the emphasis on time

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[6] Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 194.

[7] Jim Wayne Miller, "Anytime the Ground Is Uneven: The Outlook for Regional Studies and What to Look Out For," in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 4.

has meant that the role of the setting and/or place within a narrative has been neglected.

Second, in the 1800 and 1900's biblical and historical studies did intersect as recognised disciplines of study. Through this a change occurred in the examination of the role of the land, especially biblical Israel and its geography. Many visited, journalled and mapped the Holy Land, but it was not until 1838 that the science of biblical geography began to exist through the records of Edward Robinson.[8] Robinson travelled through the Holy Land, systematically visiting, mapping and proposing the identification of many biblical places. This sparked other pioneers and exploration funds to develop the knowledge of biblical physical geography.[9] Even so, many biblical sites remained undiscovered or incorrectly labelled on maps, due to elusive names or place names shifting locations over time, and in some areas, a lack of consensus. As a result of this, the focus in biblical studies and geography has concentrated on 'historical problems, such as the specific location of a city or a region, and not on ideological construction'.[10] Thus, the fields of geography of religion or historical geography have dominated biblical studies. This historical emphasis has been very informative, however, there has been minimal interaction with the literary nature of the text and how geographical elements influence its message.[11]

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[8] John Bright, "Implements of Interpretation, VII: Biblical Geographies and Atlases," *Interpretation* 2, no. 3 (1948): 326.
[9] For example, Palestine Exploration Fund and Israel Exploration Society (also known as, Jewish Palestine Exploration Society).
[10] Thomas B. Dozeman, "Biblical Geography and Critical Spatial Studies," in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, ed. Jon L Berquist and Claudia V Camp (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), 87.
[11] As a way forward, Dozeman proposes a multivalent approach to geography whereby the genre of biblical geography should encompass both the historical/realistic interpretations of geography of

Third, anthropologically-centred readings dominate biblical scholarship. The human is regarded as paramount and their characterisation, actions and behaviours are viewed as giving meaning to a text. In particular, Hiebert highlights the marginal role of setting or space in these anthropological readings, noting that biblical scholars:

> have tended to describe the human in terms that set it apart from nature rather than in terms that include it within nature. … As a consequence, non-human nature… recedes into the background as a kind of neutral stage for the divine-human drama or worse, as an arena antithetical to those definitive human and divine characteristics.[12]

As such the non-human and the geographical setting have been viewed to serve the human characters in a narrative and the interpreters needs. Thereby, viewed to have little influence or characteristics relevant to the narrative of the text in their own right.

Furthermore, historically the role of the non-human, nature and/or setting has been marginalised and even denigrated in reading the biblical text. It has been argued that nature and the non-human is 'a handmaid, a servant' of history in the Bible or 'a magnificent foil',[13] with little influence of their own in the narrative. This has been changing through the rise of ideological readings such as ecological readings.[14] Even still, these readings are not always implemented fully. For example, in what seems to be a corrective, Sutherland states that increasing attention has been given to

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religion plus the symbolic representations of religious geography, although care should be exercised to explicitly detail the different hermeneutical approaches in these methods. (See Ibid., 102–103).

[12] Theodore Hiebert, "Re-Imaging Nature: Shifts in Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 50, no. 1 (1996): 37.

[13] Ibid., 39.

[14] For example, Norman C. Habel, "The Earth Bible Project," *SBL Forum*, last modified July 2004, http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=291; Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2010); David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 2 (2008): 219–238.

geography, yet even he goes on to say that 'geography is the handmaid of archaeology'.[15] So once again, geography has been assigned a secondary position where human impact and evidence is involved.

Fourth, the role of geography is overlooked in biblical studies due to the simple reason that 'our absence of geographical experience with the promised land and our lack of intimacy with its geography may cause us to read very quickly past such geographical references, missing their mention as well as the critical role that they can play within the story'.[16] Thus, the unfamiliarity of the land and its context, as well as scholars' preference to read attuned to the temporal and human elements, makes it very easy to avoid grasping the role that the setting or geography can play in the narrative.

Fifth, recently there has been a revival of literary, theological and even spiritualised readings of the text. These methodologies, whilst broadening biblical interpretations, have within their different priorities a tendency to remove concrete, geographical and naturalistic elements.[17] For example, Cully observes that in the mid-20th century, there was an emphasis to unify biblical themes, especially that of God's promise of redemption, covenant and story of salvation. This shift led to knowledge of biblical events being important, 'but the places, the geographical locations, were incidental'.[18]

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[15] Denis Sutherland, "The Interface Between Theology and Historical Geography," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 11, no. 1 (1993): 18.
[16] John A. Beck, *God as Storyteller: Seeking Meaning in Biblical Narrative* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2008), 77.
[17] See for example Iris Cully who states, 'There are two elements to history: time and place. …it is possible to spiritualize that event by ignoring the specific geographical setting … But such modernizations ignore the specificity of an event "In Jerusalem"—not in lovely Galilee, nor in the gaunt Judean hills, but in a crowded city at Passover' (Iris V Cully, "Geography and Theology in a Biblical Approach to Religious Education," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 15, no. 3 [1980]: 75).
[18] Ibid., 66.

Thus this method fitted the historical events into theological interpretations, yet 'ignored the effect of surrounding cultures on the culture of Israel. It had the further effect of seeming to ignore the land itself, although this is the concrete situation in which events took place'.[19] Elmer A. Martens similarly observes that 'interest in land as a theological theme is relatively recent',[20] which is significant when the term 'land' is the fourth most frequent noun in the OT.[21]

In addition, Lane comments that a spiritual or religious reading of the biblical text 'has frequently tended to dis-*place* the phenomena it has observed, abstracting an experience from its specific context … Similarly, the tendency to focus attention on extraordinary, mystical experience alone serves to remove spirituality further from the phenomenal world'.[22] Thus, once again through these different reading methodologies, new insights are gleaned, however, there is a neglect regarding the role of place, setting or even non-human in the interpretative method.

In sum, biblical scholarship has typically tended to overlook the role that place, setting and/or geography takes in the narrative, due to its dependence on historical-critical methods, anthropologically-centred readings, unfamiliarity of biblical geography, and/or revival of theological and spiritualised interpretations. I suggest though that there is much that can be gleaned from interpreting the text with a

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Elmer A. Martens, "'O Land, Land, Land': Reading the Earth Story in Both Testaments," in *The Old Testament in the Life of God's People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens*, ed. Jon M. Isaak (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 226.
[21] Martens notes that legitimacy to treating land as a theological theme within sholarship has been developed through the works of W. Brueggemann (Brueggemann, *The Land*.), W.D. Davies (W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land; Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974])., the monographs of N. Habel (Habel, *The Land Is Mine*.), C.J.H. Wright (Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990]).
[22] Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, Expanded Edition. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 9 (emphasis original).

renewed focus on the intersection of geography and narrative. Indeed, I will now turn to discuss a different approach that observes the role of geography within the text, with the aim to consolidate the method this thesis will take in examining the place of the wilderness within the biblical theophanic encounters of Yahweh.

### 1.2.2 The Bible and Geography: Its Significance

After the brief overview of how the geographical elements of a text have been neglected within biblical studies, the next step is to review what the inclusion of a geographical approach will bring to interpreting the biblical text. I suggest that there are three key priorities that attention to geographical elements will produce in biblical interpretations. This includes the role geography has to assist us (1) to know our place, (2) to know the specific place of ancient Israel and its surrounds, where the events of the Bible are set, as well as (3) to understand the way in which the plot has been developed and structured.

#### 1.2.2.1 Geography: Knowing Our Place

We must affirm that being fully human from a biblical viewpoint means knowing our place in a place. That is, humanity has a position within the created order that is 'inextricably and complexly linked' with creation and creatures. [23] From a biblical perspective, this is represented by אדם being formed from the אדמה (Genesis 2:7). Through this action, an explicit connection is developed between humanity and

[23] Ellen F. Davis, "Learning Our Place: The Agrarian Perspective of the Bible," *Word & World* 29, no. 2 (March 1, 2009): 110.

creation itself. Thus, created physical *earthlings* exist in *earthiness* within the very tangible space and place of earth.[24]

Humanity consequently interacts with the landscape but the landscape also interacts with them. In this way, 'The physical landscape is a partner, and an active rather than purely passive partner … there is an interplay between physical geographies and geographies of the mind and spirit'.[25] As a result, the physicality of place grounds experience and vocation, and influences how creation, God, and others are understood. Further, the geographical reality of place also provides humanity with the imagery to conceptualise their interior experiences.[26] This human-place (אדמה-אדם) relationship is one of reciprocity, where each can and does influence the other.[27] To be human, and understand humanity as per the biblical text, is therefore to understand engagement with place.

### *1.2.2.2 Geography: Knowing A Specific Place—Israel*

For ancient Israel and the writers of the biblical text, the context of 'place' was the distinctive landscape of the valleys, hills, lakes and deserts of Canaan. It is the particular geography of Canaan that has 'shaped Israel's perceptions of the world'.[28]

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[24] In fact Lane observes that, 'ecological psychologists and philosophers like James Gibson, Tim Ingold, and Edward S. Casey insist that all human perception of landscape is relentlessly interactive. "We are enmeshed within webs of environmental relations." Our embodied presence demands that we cannot know the world without also being actively engaged in it' (Belden C. Lane, "Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space," *Religion and American Culture* 11, no. 1 [2001]: 67).
[25] Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 15.
[26] Douglas Burton-Christie, "A Sense of Place," *The Way* 39, no. 1 (1999): 68.
[27] Gen 2 models the ideal role of this, with humanity positioned to till and serve the garden-place, and the garden responding with fruitfulness. But in reverse, when chaos, sin and curse interrupt this link, humans suffer along with the place that they inhabit. For example, as per the consequences of Gen 3:14-19 and the response of the ground to Abel's murder, by Cain in Gen 4:10-16.
[28] Robert L. Cohn, "The Mountains and Mount Zion," *Judaism* 26, no. 1 (1977): 97.

Thus, to understand the text, means to understand the terrain of the land of Israel, otherwise 'the action of the drama cannot be fully understood', neither can the perspective of the author be understood.[29]

The geographical setting of an author's locality strongly impacts their perceptions and influences their narrative portrayal.[30] Ellen Davis, for example, acknowledges the influence of place through her examination of the agrarian setting of the Bible. She states, 'that Israelites learned about God in and from the land they knew so well. Intimacy with land may be the single most important *religious* difference between the biblical writers and ourselves'.[31] Hillel, likewise, has traced the environmental dimension that influenced the worldview of the ancient Israelites, by reviewing the physical geography (including location, geologic structure, topography, climate and soil) and cultural geography.[32] He states that the people's,

> … perceptions of and responses to the heterogeneous natural environment of the region not only dictated their material modes of subsistence, but also

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[29] Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979), ix. Aharoni further comments, 'Thus, the historical geography of the Holy Land is a reflection of the mutual relation between God and Israel as understood and interpreted by Israel's national faith. … Geography has a way of lending to history some of her more enduring motifs. Certain geographic considerations combined to place the history of the little land of Palestine in the very heart of the ancient Near East. Located on the bridge between three continents, it became involved in almost every event of importance in the history of the ancient Fertile Crescent. It is not too much to say that the geographical position of this little land has always dominated its history. Thus, in the land of the Bible, geography and history are so deeply interwoven that neither can really be understood without the help of the other' (Ibid.).

[30] Kenneth Mitchell, "Landscape and Literature," in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 23. Mitchell also states that 'Geography, or "landscape" has a profound influence in shaping any society' (23). By explanation Mitchell shows how literature arising from England, portrays a landscape of inward or insular themes that are linked to the features of England's small isle setting. Whereas Czechoslovakia with a geography that is prone to threat and invasion, relates 'alienation and cosmic despair' in their literature (25). Or Russia with its immense landscape the epic-genre of literature resides, where a feeling of insignificance is created in the characters. Equally American literature encompasses a theme of frontier, wherein the landscape is conquered and brought to submission.

[31] Davis, "Learning Our Place," 119 (emphasis original). Davis continues that the reason for the difference is 'since so many of us have been formed by urbanised culture that treats the earth as an abstraction and therefore imagines that God only has "spiritual" concerns' (Ibid.).

[32] Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

> influenced their notions of creation and the creator, of humanity's role in the scheme of life on Earth, of their own national destiny, and of proper collective and individual behaviour—indeed their entire attitude toward the world in which they and their neighbors lived.[33]

Thus, it is crucial that biblical scholars engage with the geography and place of the biblical text—typically the land of Israel—in interpretative methodologies, not only as it is a recorded event's location, but also for the geographical influence on the concerns of the authors.

There is a caveat though. To truly understand any place is complex, for space is never neutral. A place, including Israel, has many dimensions; from the topography, natural landscape, weather patterns, resources, human interaction with the space, as well as individual and communal narratives that encompass the place.[34] Thus, the question of 'where' is complex. But 'where' also requires the follow up question of 'according to whom?'[35] Any talk about space has meaning, indeed it has an excess of meaning, 'beyond what can be seen or understood at any one time. This excess permanently overflows any attempt at a final definition. A place can never be subordinated to a single valuation, one person's prejudices, or the assumptions of a single group'.[36] As a result, Sheldrake acknowledges a hermeneutic of place that 'progressively reveals new meanings in a kind of conversation between topography, memory and the presence of particular people'.[37] As 'place' cannot be confined to a set or static meaning.

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[33] Ibid., 13.
[34] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 247.
[35] Jon L Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World," in *"Imagining" Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, ed. James W. Flanagan, David M. Gunn, and Paula M. McNutt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 22.
[36] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 15.
[37] Ibid.

Overall, the responsibility of the interpreter is to be aware of how the biblical authors were influenced by their physical setting, and the progressive development of meaning related to landscapes and place. However, due to cultural and historical gaps between the biblical authors and us, tracing an ancient worldview and fully comprehending its setting does have limitations.

#### *1.2.2.3 Geography: A Plot Developer and Enhancer*

Not only are biblical authors influenced by their own geography, they also use geography in their writings as a tool to shape the plot and communicate meaning. This occurs in two key ways, (1) to develop historical intention and (2) to strategically create meaning within the plot, characterisation and/or structure of the text.

According to Tremper Longman III, geography develops 'historical intention' as it portrays the biblical story as a real event occurring in a real place.[38] Thereby the author relates the action to known ancient places; 'From the "travelogue" of the patriarchs, through the "atlas" of the conquest and inheritance narratives, to the "pastorale" of the prophets, geographical landforms and place names'.[39] This all informs the narrative. In this respect, the field of 'historical-geography' is a tool that uncovers the role of place (geography), time and place (history).[40] 'The events of

[38] Tremper Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 74.
[39] Cohn, "Mountains," 97.
[40] Historical-geography is interested in the role of humanity's historical intervention and how regions have changed. 'Historical geography is thus concerned with three important aspects, namely different *phenomena* (including man and his environment) that occur within *time* (i.e. in history) and *space* (i.e. at specific localities). … It attempts to reconstruct past geographies, indicating the changes and developments in societies while illustrating the influence of geography on history' (J.A. Burger, "Amos: A Historical-Geographical View," *Journal for Semitics* 4, no. 2 [1992]: 131). A question that historical geographers ask is 'How did this place/locality look at a certain time in the past and how did it change as time passed?' (Ibid., 132). The main emphasis for historical geographers is in the role of history on geography.

history are played out in a geographical setting, and without a comprehension of that setting they can scarcely be understood'.[41] Yet, as the focus is on a text, an author's selection and use of geographical elements can be based on their literary goals, not just factual reproduction.[42] Thus,

> if we look for a direct correspondence between the text and the world, we miss the artistry with which the ancient scribes represented pieces of this world in the text. We may also miss the reasons that they chose an element of repertoire from their contemporary landscape or the landscape of memory; or even contributed a new element of cultural repertoire to the landscape of tradition.[43]

Therefore, an approach to the biblical text should 'take advantage of the wealth of information disclosed by historical geography' but also comply with the narrative nature of the text 'to reveal the literary role that geography may play when an event is placed in story form'.[44]

In addition, biblical authors use geography to strategically develop their message, plot and characterisation. Within the literature of the Bible, the geographic setting is used in 'generating the atmosphere or mood of a narrative and contributing to the story's meaning and structure'.[45] There is artistry to the text, within which geography plays a role. For Beck, 'the formal reporting of the setting is never random, but rather strategic and intentional' by the biblical authors.[46] There is a purpose to geography and setting within the text. Thereby, understanding how literature works (not just history), along with the other skills of interpreting ancient culture, including geography, is necessary for a holistic approach to understand ancient texts and

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[41] Bright, "Implements of Interpretation, VII: Biblical Geographies and Atlases," 324.
[42] Angela R. Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah* (Indianapolis: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 243.
[43] Ibid., 281.
[44] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 99–100.
[45] Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," 74.
[46] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 76.

culture.[47] Geography, particularly, can be used to structure the overarching narrative, the plot, and the characters.

Scholars such as Beck[48] and Dozeman illustrate how geography can aid in the overall narrative shaping of biblical passages. For example, Dozeman in his study of Ezra-Nehemiah displays that 'geography is crucial in the organisation of the literature, its thematic development, and its influence on the reader'.[49] Moreover, 'the spatial organization of literature hides consequences that are not revealed through the study of time and chronology'.[50] On this note, there is much that critical spatial theory can add to geographical studies, but it is beyond the focus of this thesis.[51] Instead the

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[47] Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries*, 280.

[48] Examples of John A. Beck's work that portray the Narrative-Goegraphical shaping of a text include: *God as Storyteller*; "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (2000): 271–280; "Why Did Moses Strike Out? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Moses' Disqualification in Numbers 20:1-13," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 1 (2003): 135–141; "Geography as Irony: The Narrative-Geological Shaping of Elijah's Duel with the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18)," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 17, no. 2 (2003): 291–302; "Why Do Joshua's Readers Keep Crossing the River? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Joshua 3-4," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (2005): 689–699; "The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 7:5-13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, no. 647 (2005): 299–309; "Gideon, Dew, and the Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Judges 6:33-40," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165, no. 657 (2008): 28–38.

[49] Thomas B. Dozeman, "Geography and History in Herodotus and in Ezra-Nehemiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 (2003): 466.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Biblical scholars are beginning to interact with critical spatial theory. For example, Victor H. Matthews and Jon L. Berquist portray another way to delineate the geography of the Bible is in relation to its spatial framework. (Victor H. Matthews, "Back to Bethel: Geographical Reiteration in Biblical Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 [2009]: 149–165; Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World"). Relying on Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja's theories on space, space can be divided into three main types. "Firstspace" is viewed as the spaces of the geo-physical realities. That is the physical landscape of mountains, deserts and rivers. "Secondspace" is the imagined or symbolic space. It is the 'ideas' or 'conceptions' about this space, which are usually linked back to its sacred significance or traditional heritage. "Thirdspace" or "social space" is the lived space, which focuses on people's lived experiences in the (first)space (Ibid., 20). For Soja, all three of these spaces exist together, and need to be held in correlation with each other. Therefore, when we examine the narrative, Matthews suggests that we examine the way that space has been 'defined and manipulated by persons and events' (Matthews, "Back to Bethel," 151). For actions and occurrences can take on different meanings depending on where they occur. (For example, thirdspace activities (ie. farming, business, rituals, legal transactions) can take on different meanings if performed in a different space. Or firstspace places can gain new import through the narrator attributing greater visibility to that location.) In sum, to speak of a space is 'to speak of three inter-related aspects: physical space and how physical reality is arranged and practiced, the mental organizational and conceptual systems that map space and make it possible to "think" space, and the socially significant meanings that are ascribed to such spaces' (Mark K. George, "Space and History: Siting Critical Space for Biblical Studies," in

focus will remain on the role geography has in the overall shaping and informing of the narrative.

Geography can shape the plot. In this regard, Beck comments that 'the formal mention of setting may play a variety of roles: structuring the plot, enhancing the conflict within the plot, shaping the characters we meet within that plot—all while influencing the meaning that the storyteller wishes to deliver'.[52] Some examples of how geography can influence plot include the following. The plot can be shaped according to the movement of characters as they journey from place to place.[53] The author may want to emphasise travel to specific cultic sites, the boundaries of the land essential to nationality, or add some important value to a place.[54] Repetition of certain geographical places can likewise add prominence within the plot.[55] Or alternatively, the lack of or failure to mention a particular site can also supplement an author's aim.

Geography, especially in relation to place, can also be used to develop characterisation. For example, is a character seen in a specific place? Or are they not

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*Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, ed. Jon L Berquist and Claudia V Camp [New York: T & T Clark International, 2007], 16). In this manner, 'Critical spatiality provides scholars with a means of examining and analysing such spaces in terms of the social practices and forces that created them. Space is not simply the neutral medium in which biblical and related narratives and events took place. It is not an absolute, ontologically independent container within which the events of history occurs as some in history have thought. Rather, space is a product of a particular time and place in the ancient world. Space is a complex social phenomenon, one that involves not only physical space, but also the conceptual systems created and employed to organize it, and the symbolic and mythological meanings societies develop in order to live in space' (Ibid., 29). Whilst this thesis will not specifically interact with critical spatial theory, it is helpful to be aware of its conclusions as it promotes sensitivity to the plurality of meanings that space confers. For landscapes do not have a 'single' meaning but are interpreted differently by diverse people. (Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 4–6).

[52] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 79.

[53] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 185.

[54] John A. Beck, "David and Goliath, A Story of Place: The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 17," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 322.

[55] See for example, Matthews, "Back to Bethel."

allowed in that place on the basis of their nationality, gender or status in society?[56] Does the character 'go up' or 'go down' to certain places?[57] How does the land or space engage as a character in the text? In addition, energy can be added to the story as the character/s move around a space. In these different ways geography can aid in developing characterisation in the text.

In sum, the biblical authors use geography in their literary creations to both display historical intention as well as structure the narrative and its message.

#### *1.2.2.4 Summary*

Overall, I have aimed to demonstrate that both the message and setting of the biblical text is founded in geography. First, to be human within a biblical perspective is to know our connectedness to place. Second, the setting of the biblical authors is chiefly influenced by a particular place, which is typically the land of Israel. This place informs their perception, writing and message. Finally, biblical authors utilise geography to not only create historical intention in their narratives but also to outline the overarching narrative, structure the plot and portray characterisation. It is vital to pay close attention to the role of geography within the Bible in interpretive

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[56] Gerald A. Klingbeil, *Bridging the Gap: Ritual and Ritual Texts in the Bible*, BBRSup (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 160. Klingbeil states, 'Space and movement in biblical narratives serve five main functions: First, they guide reader's attention as the narrative changes from one scene to another. Second, they synchronize visible, external, physical movement with internal emotions and events of the main character of the story. Third, geography and physical space make the story real. Real names and places are usually part of a real story. Fourth, the interplay between specific references (for example, the indication of the entrance to the tabernacle in Lev 8:3, 4, 31, 33, 35 or the reference to a place "outside the camp" [Lev 8:17]) and nonspecific references (such as the unclear movement of Aaron and his sons during the washing rites [Lev 8:6] of the ordination ritual) help the reader to abstract and focus on the lesson of the narrative. Fifth, space is often directly connected to different levels of society. A good example of this principle is the closeness of particular people to a higher-ranking individual' (Ibid.).

[57] See for example, Joel S. Burnett, "'Going Down' to Bethel: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 281–297.

methodologies. Therefore, in respect to the purpose of this thesis, 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?', geography undoubtedly plays a central role.

### 1.2.3 Narrative-Geography Method

To maintain the priority on geography within the biblical texts as well as to address the question of 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' this thesis will adopt the 'Narrative-Geography' methodology of John A. Beck.[58] As Beck's methodology is an approach that prioritises the literary form of the biblical text, and attends to the geographical setting.

The narrative-geography methodology focuses on the function of the setting, place and geography in the narrative context. In general, Beck defines this methodology as:

> … an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to blend the insights offered by both narrative criticism and the study of geography. It is related to the studies of physical, historical, and human geography but distinct from them. Physical geography investigates the land through the lens of topography, geology, hydrology, climate, forestation, land use, urbanization, and transportation. Historical and human geography examine the role such physical geography plays in the shaping of history and culture. By contrast to these more traditional forms of geography, narrative geography analyses the literary function of geographical references within a story. It acknowledges that the author may strategically use, reuse, and nuance geography in order to impact the reading experience.[59]

The undergirding rationale of the narrative-geography method is the assumption that the 'storyteller is not including the formal mention of geography in a haphazard or careless way' but instead 'the storyteller will strategically use, reuse or nuance geography to impact the reading experience, particularly in shaping the meaning of a

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[58] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, see especially pages 99-133.
[59] Beck, "David and Goliath, A Story of Place," 322. See Beck utilising this methodology in his works: *God as Storyteller*, 99–133; "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13"; "Why Did Moses Strike Out?"; "Geography as Irony"; "Why Do Joshua's Readers Keep Crossing the River?"; "The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 7"; "Gideon, Dew, and the Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Judges 6."

story through the role geography can play in the development of plot and characterisation'.[60] In this way, the geographical elements are not just there as a foil to the plot or as a setting for the characters. Rather, they are integral to the plot itself and the meaning that is being created in the text. Moreover, Beck pursues the method of narrative-geography because of 'the central relationship of geography to the plan of salvation articulated in the Bible, the vivid and frequent use of geography throughout the biblical narratives, the precedent established by the study of geography in secular stories, and the productive—though limited—study of this topic to date'.[61] This thesis aims to understand the role of wilderness geography in the appearances of Yahweh, as well as the way wilderness influences the plot and God's characterisation. Narrative-geography will enable these elements to be highlighted.

The narrative-geography model that Beck proposes is practised as follows.[62] First, identify all formal references to geography within the narrative. This includes the mention of city names or regions, topographical, hydrological or climatic references, and so forth. Second, elevate the geographical elements at work in the text. This is to overcome the disconnection modern readers have with the geography, as compared to ancient readers who were familiar with the terrain and geographical realities. A connection can be made via attention to the geographical elements through maps, atlases and other geographical methods. Finally, integrate these geographical findings into the narrative analysis. Here Beck relies on the insights of the field of Narrative Criticism and incorporates their interpretive approaches into his method.[63] Beck also

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[60] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 104.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 104–111.
[63] For example, this includes the work of biblical narrative scholars such as Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*

states that the integration can occur through asking questions such as, 'Where has this place or this phenomena been discussed before in the Bible? … How is the geography mentioned in this story affecting my reading of the plot? How is the geography impacting the way I perceive and relate to the characters?'[64]

Overall, the narrative-geography method prioritises the role that the natural features of geography have in the biblical story. Whilst many biblical scholars have emphasised the setting within their narrative interpretation of the text, as previously mentioned, this tends to get sidelined to primarily focus on the historical elements or human characters. However, Beck offers us an interpretive framework that has not been explicitly articulated by scholars. Beck offers a way to understand a place, character or historical event, as well as incorporate the understanding of the place in which they are located. The narrative-geography method will thus be used to guide the exploration: 'Why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness setting?'

## 1.3 OVERVIEW OF THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

Overall, the agenda of this research project, is broadly stated, to investigate the question 'Why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness setting within the biblical text?' The examination will occur through the methodological approach of Beck's narrative-geography method. The confines of the project will be limited, due to the space restrictions of a thesis, to examining the wilderness theophanic

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*in the Bible*; David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1987); Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship. New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, eds., *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993).

[64] Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 110.

appearances of Yahweh as depicted in the Book of Exodus. As a result of these limiters (theophany, wilderness and Exodus), there are four passages that fit this categorisation: Exodus 3:1-4:17, 19:1-20:21, 24:9-18 and 33:18-34. These four Exodus passages will be the central texts I will investigate and interact with.

In respect to this research project, there is an underlying supposition that Yahweh's appearance in the wilderness is intentional. Yahweh chooses where, when and how to appear. This supposition is due to the text showing Yahweh announce to Moses within the first Exodus theophany, that the confirming sign of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, will be an encounter in the wilderness. The freed Israelites will worship Yahweh in the wilderness, at the very same mountain of Moses' initial burning bush theophany (Exod 3:12). Moreover, after the deliverance from Egypt, Yahweh leads Israel on 'a longer route, further south, more deeply into the desert, toward Mount Sinai' (see Exod 13:17-18), which results in the promised theophanic encounter with Yahweh in Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18.[65] Finally, in Exod 33:21, Yahweh explicitly tells Moses to stand on 'the rock', which equates to the wilderness Mount Sinai,[66] for there he will appear to Moses. In sum, the theophanic wilderness appearings of Yahweh in the Book of Exodus are at Yahweh's intent. However, it is the question of why Yahweh expressly chooses this wilderness setting to appear; that will be considered.

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[65] Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43. Lane further states that within Exodus 13:17 typically it is understood that 'God chose not to lead the Israelites by the northern route "although" (*ki*) it was the shorter, less-troublesome way. Yet *ki* can also be translated "because", suggesting something far more provocative [even intentional] in the context of the passage' (Ibid., 43–44).

[66] See #3.4.1 for an exegetical discussion of the geographical components of this verse.

As a caveat, I acknowledge that similar questions are asked in Walter Brueggemann's book *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* where he discusses the concept of landlessness for ancient Israel via their wilderness sojourns. Brueggemann particularly asks, 'Is the wilderness a place that he [God] prefers because of his peculiar character? Could it be that he is a God who most desires the interactions of the wilderness?'[67] His conclusion is that there is a unique relationship between Yahweh and the wilderness. Overall, these questions are a helpful reference to this project. However, this research project is distinctive from Brueggemann's; first, my primary focus is on the theophanic appearances of Yahweh in the wilderness setting, and second, a narrative-geographical method will be employed. This is also why this research project is distinctive from any other work, as the focus is on theophanic appearances with the interpretative approach of narrative-geography.

Therefore, to explore the question of 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' through a narrative-geography method, the following approach will be taken. First, in the next chapter (chapter two), I will develop a working definition of wilderness, via a review of the Hebrew terms used to define wilderness, as well as the literary associations of wilderness within the biblical context. Chapter three will review the formal geography references in the four Exodus texts to overcome our disconnection with the geographical realities of the text, as per our narrative-geography method.

The subsequent chapters of the thesis will turn to focus on the narrative characterisation of Yahweh in the wilderness in the four Exodus passages. Chapter

[67] Brueggemann, *The Land*, 38.

four will analyse the signs Yahweh uses to be revealed in the wilderness theophanies. Chapter five will examine the words that Yahweh speaks in the Exodus theophanies in the space of the wilderness and the message conveyed by the words in that setting. In chapter six, the focus will shift to the people's experience of God in the wilderness, rather than God's actions, again in connection to the four Exodus texts. The aim of chapter six, from a different perspective, is to examine whether the wilderness setting enhances the people's experience with God, and whether these experiential effects provide a reason for Yahweh's choosing of the wilderness space as the setting for the theophanies. Finally, chapter seven will suggest the reasons that Yahweh chooses to be revealed in the wilderness setting in the Book of Exodus. It will additionally provide comment on the implications and areas of future research related to the conclusions.

# CHAPTER 2: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS

To address the primary question of this thesis, 'Why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?', a definition of wilderness is required. This chapter, therefore, aims to produce a working definition. Modern readers could generally default to the image of wilderness as a pristine tract of untouched woodland forest, green and lush in its innocent (even Eden-like) beauty. Or for myself as an Australian, wilderness can be situated on a spectrum that traverses unspoiled forests, such as the World Heritage Daintree (Queensland) or Cradle Mountain (Tasmania) National Parks, to the vast and eerily beautiful deserts like in the Central Outback. Yet, the task, in light of our question, is to understand how biblical authors view wilderness, particularly with the influence of the landscape of ancient Israel as their descriptive palette.[68]

To provide a working definition of wilderness, I will first explore the semantic range of the biblical Hebrew term מדבר (*miḏbār*), which is used most frequently to describe wilderness. Second, an overview of the literary associations that are *wild-like* in nature, but do not fall into strict lexical definitions, will be discussed to understand the broader biblical portrayal of wilderness. Finally, I will conclude with a working definition of wilderness that will guide the subsequent thesis discussions. As a result, please note that this section does not aim to be comprehensive, but only summative of the key ideas that will be drawn and expanded upon in the rest of the thesis.

[68] I suspect the biblical understanding of wilderness is closer to the Australian broad-spectrum of concepts that comprises a wilderness, from deserts to plain country.

## 2.1 WILDERNESS: BIBLICAL HEBREW TERMS

The primary Biblical Hebrew word used within the OT to describe wilderness is מדבר. In addition, there are many other words that are used as synonyms for wilderness. They include the terms (1) ערבה, (2) ישימון, (3) חרב and חרבה, (4) בקק, (5) תהו and בהו, (6) ציה and ציון, and (7) שממה. As מדבר is the most common term used to define wilderness, and the primary term used in the Book of Exodus, this section will focus on examining מדבר. However, to augment the picture of wilderness and desert in the OT, a review of all these terms can be found in Appendix 1.

## 2.2 WILDERNESS: מדבר DEFINED

In Biblical Hebrew מדבר has a wide semantic range. Typically, מדבר is defined as '(1) an uninhabited plain country, fit for feeding flocks, not desert … (2) a sterile, sandy country'.[69] From this definition alone, מדבר covers the realm of plain country with sparse plantings to a sterile desert country. In further definitions, מדבר encompasses 'tracts of land, used for the pasturage of flocks and herds', 'uninhabited land' and also 'large tracts of such land bearing various names, in certain districts of which there might be towns and cities'.[70] Another source defines מדבר as 'land burned by the summer heat, generally wasted rocky and sandy land with minimal rainfall, in which only nomadic settlements were found'.[71] The common thread in these definitions is references to a space that is uncultivated, subsistent, desolate and/or largely uninhabited. However, much more detail and discussion to test this preliminary proposal is needed.

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[69] H. W. F. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Baker Book House, 1990), 449.
[70] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 184.
[71] Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 948.

### 2.2.1 Wilderness: Arid and Semi-Arid Regions

The term מדבר finds it root in דבר (*dbr*). However, there is probably no etymological connection with 'word, thing, matter'[72] or the root דבר, 'be behind'.[73] Instead, it is most likely associated with דבר (II), 'to drive'[74] or 'to lead, to guide, specially to lead flocks or herds to pasture'.[75] Why this etymological information is significant, as Mauser points out, is 'that the word [מדבר] does not necessarily convey the meaning of a sand desert with absolutely no vegetation, rather it means sparsely inhabited, barren plains which, however, provide enough pasturage for herds'.[76] To clarify this further, Clines describes מדבר as 'steppe, wilderness, desert' with the emphasis on it being a place for pasturing flocks and herds, specifically those 'arid or semiarid regions whose scarcity of water makes them unsuitable for agriculture and farming settlement'.[77] Talmon agrees noting that מדבר 'describes agriculturally unexploited areas, mainly in the foothills of southern Palestine, which serve as the grazing land par excellence for the flocks, and the cattle of the semisedentary and the sedentary-agriculturist population'.[78] However, the grazing land was confined to the areas where

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[72] Shemaryahu Talmon, "Miḏbār,'arāḇâ," ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 90.
[73] Ibid., 139.
[74] David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Mem-Nun*, vol. 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 139.
[75] Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, 186.
[76] Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 18.
[77] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 91.
[78] Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann, Studies & Texts III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 40.

water in wells or cisterns was easily accessible.[79] Hence, why water, springs and oases play such a central role in the biblical wilderness narratives.[80]

### 2.2.2 Wilderness: Drift Land

Moreover, מדבר can be viewed as an extension or border of a local community's agricultural land. This is due to the semantic field of מדבר also referring to the concept of 'drift-land' or 'drift'. These are the places where the desert sands blown by the wind move back and forth at the edges of the desert.

> The geographical setting of the "drift", in the borderland between cultivated land and desert, results in the term *miḏbār* coming to designate the comparatively thinly inhabited open spaces adjacent to settlements of a temporary (*maḥanēh*), relatively stable (*nāwhēh*), or altogether static nature (village or town). These spaces are viewed as an extension of the encampment or the settlement, but are not an integral part of it.[81]

Therefore, as Talmon summarises, 'The *miḏbār* spaces are viewed as an extension of the encampment or the settlement, but not an ecological or administrative part of it'.[82] The wilderness within biblical expression thus encompasses arid regions but also the boundaries between the desert space and cultivated land, that is the semi-usable land.[83]

### 2.2.3 Wilderness: True Desert

In acknowledging that מדבר encompasses the surrounding grazing land, it should not be forgotten that the term is predominantly used to define the 'true desert, the arid zones beyond the borders of the cultivated land and drift'.[84] As Talmon portrays it, 'the 'wilderness' is a place of utter desolation: a vast void of parched earth, with no

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[79] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 103.
[80] Biblical examples include Gen 36:24; 1 Sam 17:28; 24:4, 21; 2 Chr 26:10.
[81] Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif,'" 41.
[82] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 99.
[83] Examples may include Gen 21:14; Exod 16:10-13; Nu 13:19; Josh 18:21, 1 Sam 24:1; 2 Chr 2:20; 1 Kings 19:15; and Isa 27:10.
[84] Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif,'" 41. For example, 2 Sam 17:27-29; 2 Kgs 3:8-9.

streams or rivers to provide sustenance for plants and wildlife, expect for a very few species…it is a place not fit for human habitation…it is a scene of utter cruelty, … it is perilous to enter the vast tracts'.[85] Typically, this is the perspective used of the biblical prophets to describe the effects of God's judgement,[86] as well as Deuteronomy's picture of the 'howling wilderness' (Deut 32:10).

Overall, the Hebrew term מדבר encompasses the lexical range of meaning from true desert, semi-arid pasturelands to drift-land.

### 2.2.4 Wilderness: Ancient Israel's Geography

In addition, in an initial survey of the term מדבר, it might be assumed that the wilderness is associated with specific localities. However, only 24 times does the term appear in association with a specific geographical name (for example the wilderness of Shur, Sin, Sinai, Zin, Paran, Ziph, Gibeon and Kadesh),[87] although there are other spaces that have wider geopolitical implications (such as the wilderness of Moab, Edom or Judah).[88] As such, to understand the conceptual field of מדבר and its synonyms, a wider frame of reference is required, which considers the influence of the ancient Israelite geography and landscape. In this regard, the term מדבר refers to:

> the topographical-geological realities of the Arabian-Palestinian countryside, … primarily to the arid or even completely barren, low-lying, level areas between the great mountain ranges running through Palestine from the south to the north. This region extends from the Red Sea through the depression of

[85] Ibid.
[86] For example, Ps 18:13; 68; 107:33; Isa 50:2; Jer 2:24; 9:11; 50:40; 41:43.
[87] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 92. For example, Wilderness of Shur (Exod 15:22), Wilderness of Sin (Exod 16:1), Wilderness of Sinai (Exod 19:1), Wilderness of Zin (Num 20:1), Wilderness of Paran (1 Sam 25:1), Wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam 26:2), Wilderness of Gibeon (2 Sam 2:24), and Wilderness of Kadesh (Ps 29:8).
[88] Ibid. For example, Wilderness of Moab (Deut 2:8), Wilderness of Edom (2 Kgs 3:8), and Wilderness of Judah (Judg 1:16).

> the Jordan valley to Lebanon, abuts in the south on the Arabian desert and issues in the north into the Beqa.[89]

Yet, as this thesis will be focused on the events in the Book of Exodus, which is in the Sinai wilderness region, a discussion on the specific make up of the other regions of ancient Israel will occur in Appendix 1. However, to articulate a specific geographical location for the wilderness within the biblical record there is little precise information as to its boundaries, nature or location.

### 2.2.5 Wilderness: Biblical Usage

Overall, within the biblical account, there is a progression of how the concept of wilderness was viewed. The term מדבר occurs 217 times in the OT, with a primary focus in the Pentateuch, especially the Book of Numbers where it appears most frequently (48 times).[90] In the Pentateuch מדבר is almost always used exclusively in reference to the wilderness sojourn. Even though the specific 'location of the wilderness became indistinct just as the location of Sinai', within the biblical text it is portrayed 'as localized, even if vaguely'.[91] In the former prophets, מדבר is more defined, as it is 'applied to areas in or adjacent to Palestine proper' (see Appendix 1 for more details of specific localities).[92] The pre-exilic prophets use the wilderness to describe the impending punishment, destruction, and ultimate exile that will come to Israel if they do not return to Yahweh. In the latter prophets מדבר is retained as a

[89] Ibid., 97.
[90] Ibid., 91. This is compared to the other high occurrences of references in the books of: Exodus-26, Deuteronomy-19, Genesis-7, and Samuel-24, Jeremiah-21, Psalms-20, and Isaiah-19. See also this reference for specific occurrences of the term מדבר.
[91] Robert Funk, "The Wilderness," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78, no. 3 (1959): 207.
[92] Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 18.

reference to the wilderness wanderings, but is also used in ways that 'reveal strong associations with mythology common to the peoples of the Near East'.[93]

### 2.2.6 Summary: Wilderness (מדבר)

In summary, the biblical text has many different terms to describe 'wilderness' and its related semantic fields. Wilderness is a place of significance within the OT. As expected, the wilderness and associated synonyms combine to describe a dry, barren, and desolate place. Furthermore, the verbal synonyms express the devastation, ruin and judgement that come, usually by the hand of God, to an otherwise domesticated and agricultural land. Overall, the biblical picture of wilderness ranges from being temporary grazing land for flocks and drift land and hence, on the margins of civilised land, through to the arid and barren desert.

## 2.3 WILDERNESS: LITERARY ASSOCIATIONS

To continue the discussion of מדבר in the biblical text, I will now move beyond the strict dictionary definitions to examine the wider literary ways the term is employed. As words are never used just as their dictionary or technical definitions but instead, can have many associations. These can include the semantic, emotional, figurative, sociological and mythical, all of which impacts on a word's use and definition. The term wilderness is no different. Throughout the Bible, as well as in literature, society and spirituality, the concept of wilderness has symbolic, figurative, mythical and emotional connections.[94] This next section will thus discuss the key associations of

[93] Ibid.
[94] For example there has been research that has examined the motif of water in the wilderness and its mythic background, but this is outside the scope of the thesis to review. See William H. Propp, *Water*

how the Hebrew narrator/s use the term wilderness within the OT, to build on the lexical definitions and create a working definition of wilderness for the rest of the paper. Due to space, I will again be selective to summarise the defining associations of the term wilderness that are most relevant to the rest of the thesis.

### 2.3.1 Wilderness: Opposite to Domestic Agriculture

First, within the biblical mindset, wilderness is defined as distinct to settled and domesticated lands. This change occurred within the Neolithic times,[95] a time when people began to settle more permanently due to the onset of agricultural pursuits, such as the cropping of fields and domestication of animals. The norm thus became the farmer-shepherd or agricultural model.[96] As a result, 'wilderness' as a specific space was most likely classified during this dawning of agriculture. Agriculture inevitably defined the boundaries between what were useable fields or barren wilderness.[97] With this evolution of humanity, 'the natural world came to be conceived as valueless until humanized'.[98] Hence, wilderness was the borderland to the agriculturally defined countryside. The wilderness was the untillable and undomesticated area; and subsequently, dangerous and uncontrollable.[99] It was with sweat, toil and domination that the earth produced for the agriculturalist, yet the wilderness would not bend to this anthropocentric will.

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*in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and Its Mythological Background*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Harvard Semitic Monographs 40 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987).

[95] Previously, during the hunter-forager Palaeolithic age, there was no distinct separation between fruitful or barren lands, as all was habitable and useful to small tribal bands of people.

[96] See also Ellen Davis' work that highlights that the OT cannot be read without reference to an agrarian perspective. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[97] Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (Yale University Press, 1993), 28.

[98] Ibid., 62.

[99] Edmund Leach, "Fishing for Men on the Edge of the Wilderness," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermonde (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 585–586.

### 2.3.2 Wilderness: Place of Driven Out People

Second, as a result of the agricultural model, generally, 'only nomadic tribes rove the great *miḏbār'*.[100] The wilderness was not a place for civilised settlements or permanent dwellings due to the harsh, waterless landscape that made human existence difficult. Thus, only the most hardy and adaptable, 'the tent dwellers' could navigate and reside in the wilderness.[101] Specifically, in the biblical text the nomadic tribes associated with the wilderness regions included the people of Edom, the Sabeans, and the descendents of Ishmael (whom resemble the Midianites or Amalekites).[102] From this, 'many social and cultural implications follow', in that the people of the wilderness live light, are not settled, and do not adhere to the norm of agricultural pursuits.[103] This in turn influenced how they were perceived. Expressly, when these tribes are described in the biblical text, it is with a sense of repulsion, as they do not fit the 'norm' of conventional Israelite society.[104]

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[100] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 102.
[101] Although the majority of desert residents are nomadic with portable dwellings, sometimes, temporary settlements may be set up in the border areas of the wilderness to harness seasonal pastures for goats and sheep. The permanent settlements, if any, are located around the oases, 'whose water springs render possible a seminomadic living based on small livestock and limited, periodic cultivation of grain, vegetable and date palms' (Ibid., 103). Yet overall, any desert dwellers are nomadic wanders that search for appropriate water and grazing land.
[102] Ibid., 102. A lot of these terms are used synonymously within the biblical text due to their close associations, for example Ishmaelites and Midianites in Gen 37:25-27.
[103] Robert T. Anderson, "The Role of the Desert in Israelite Thought," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 27, no. 1 (1959): 41.
[104] Indeed, Oelschlaeger aptly states, 'The settled Hebrews perhaps saw the farming life, whatever its insufficiencies, as a relief from the misery of the desert in which Abraham's people had wandered; the *miḏbār* was a place of hunger, drought, and danger. This urban and agriculturalist worldview explained for the Hebrews the existence of the world, Israel and themselves' (Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 52).

Furthermore, the feared 'desert people' are cast as reflecting the chaotic nature of the wilderness.[105] For example, the brigands and robbers make wilderness home; for from the wilderness edges they could easily attack the famers and herdsmen, as the speed of their camels and knowledge of wilderness pathways gave them the advantage.[106] Others find a home in the wilderness, such as fugitives or refugees, as they 'prefer an off-chance of survival in exceedingly adverse circumstances, to the calamities which are certainly to befall them from the hands of their pursuers';[107] for example, this is seen with the biblical characters such as Hagar,[108] Moses,[109] ancient Israel,[110] Elijah,[111] David[112] and the Rechabites.[113] Overall though, the people who reside in the wilderness are viewed as 'a desert product, nurtured by a desolate and God-forsaken terrain. In keeping with the meaning of the Hebrew word for wilderness, *miḏbār,* they

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[105] Robert Barry Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness*, vol. 72, Studies in Biblical Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 17.
[106] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 102.
[107] Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif,'" 42.
[108] See Gen 16:7-16; 21:14-21.
[109] For example, Leach comments that the 'extensive knowledge of the refuge and succour that the wilderness can provide obviously played an important role in Moses' leadership of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt' (Leach, "Fishing for Men," 588).
[110] For example, Exod 14-Num 25.
[111] In the life of Elijah, the wilderness 'is consistently presented as a reservoir of divine power to which the prophet withdraws when in need of spiritual sustenance' (Leach, "Fishing for Men," 588). This is seen in 1 Kings 19:3-4; 8.
[112] See 1 Sam 21-23.
[113] The Rechabites, possible descendants from the Kenites, are a tribe within Israel who were thought to be nomadic tent dwellers, finding refuge in this lifestyle as opposed to the culture of civilisation. 'The Rechabites rejected settled agricultural life such as the Hebrews found in Canaan. Nomadic existence was their ideal, so that they not only did not grow cereals (*sic*) or cultivate vine; they also did not live in houses, preferring tents. As a consequence of their attraction to nomadic life they refused to drink wine' (Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:189). Yet as Frick has noted, whenever the Rechabites are discussed within the biblical text they are located near cities and 'not on the desert fringe' (Frank S. Frick, "Rechabites Reconsidered," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90, no. 3 [1971]: 284). Furthermore, he argues that the labelling of the Rechabites as nomads has rested on the assumption that they are tent-dwelling, abstain from alcohol and reject an agricultural way of life (Jer 35:6-7). The assumption that they are nomadic-shepherds is made *'ex silento'*. Instead Frick, as well as McNutt, considers that these characteristics are due to the Rechabites being metallurgists (Paula M. McNutt, "The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition," *Semeia*, no. 67 [1994]: 109–132). Even so, McNutt does portray this group of people as a socially marginal group, which is especially linked to the marginal character of artisan groups. They are particularly defined as a group of people who avoid settled agricultural life, which set them at odds with the norm of the Israelite agrarian economy (McNutt, 120). Thus, it is this very action, of remaining true to their ancestry as well as their marginal status, which the prophet Jeremiah draws upon to develop a warning to ancient Judah to obey God or else judgement will befall them.

are “the cut-off ones”, those “driven out” from society’s mainstream. Like Elijah and John the Baptist, they thrive on the edges of culture, threatening its structures, speaking the language of fiery serpents’.[114] Therefore, the wilderness is characterised as a place of chaos, lawlessness and terror, and even more so, the people that reside there.[115]

### 2.3.3 Wilderness: A Haunt for Wild Animals

Third, when the wilderness is described, it is identified not only as a place occupied by wild people, but also populated by wild animals. Like the fear and dread that the desert-nomads evoke, the wild animals of the wilderness add to this portrayal. Hence, again, the wilderness becomes a place to be avoided.

Snakes, scorpions, beasts of prey, wild donkeys and jackals inhabit the wilderness.[116] These are animals that are categorised as undomesticated, unclean, life threatening and violent. The most cunning of wild beasts described in Gen 3 is portrayed as a serpent. As Leal notes, ‘It is no accident that the agent of temptation and sin in the

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[114] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 116.

[115] Moreover, throughout time the wilderness creates a refuge for the imaginative vistas that becomes the impetus for the later ‘desert wisdom’ of the Qumran and Desert Elder communities. At Qumran, the desert became a place of refuge, purification and preparation to wait for the in-breaking of the eschatological age, away from the central hub of political and religious civilisation. Likewise for the 3rd-7th century AD followers of the Desert Elders, the desert was a place of solitude where they could withdraw from the distractions, materialism and what they viewed to be the secularisation of life within the Roman Empire. In the Arabian, Egyptian, Palestinian and Syrian deserts monastic communities arose who lived lives of renunciation, austerity and purity, to experience God in the disciplined life of both prayer and work. (David G. R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* [Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005], viii–xxii). It is the landscape of the desert that provided the solitude and quiet (*hesychia*), ‘that became an environment for solitude of the mind, heart, and soul and the possibility for transformation of self’ (Ibid., 2). For the Desert Elders, ‘a physical desert or wasteland became the image of and often the locus for separation from society to seek complete dedication to and dependence on God’ (Ibid., 4). This is where the word hermit, originating from the Greek for desert, *heremos*, arose.

[116] M. Pierce Matheney, “Wilderness,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1672.

Garden of Eden is the serpent, a quintessential creature of the wilderness'.[117] This perspective coalesces with the ancient worldview of the wilderness being a place of chaos, curse and judgment. Hence, the wild beast becomes the cursed serpent that must now 'eat dust' (Gen 3:14) and crawl around in its wild habitation.

### 2.3.4 Wilderness: Outside

Fourth, the wilderness is viewed as outside of agricultural land, but also outside of Israel. This is because within the models of sacred space, anything outside of Israel is viewed as less holy because God's presence is not present. Consequently, Eliade portrays that everything outside of the inhabited territory is no longer 'our world', instead it is 'a sort of "other world," a foreign, chaotic space, peopled by ghosts demons, "foreigners"'.[118] Hence, the boundaries of the land designate the borders between the chosen holy nation of Israel and the non-elect nations. In this respect, the space of Israel is viewed as holy and is demarcated from other nations by its wilderness boundaries. In the south this is the deserts of Sinai, Negeb and Arabah, to the east is the Judean and Asedot deserts, and to the west is the watery wilderness of the Mediterranean Sea (See Appendix 1 for more detail of these geographical wilderness areas).[119] The Israelites live in a space surrounded by wilderness, 'a barren land associated with the rest of the world and non-Israelite humanity'.[120] Thus, to go anywhere, the wilderness is crossed, whether to Egypt (Sinai or Negeb deserts) or Jordan (Asedot desert). In this way, 'The Wilderness is the Other World. Entering or

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[117] Robert Barry Leal, "Negativity Towards Wilderness in the Biblical Record," *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 10, no. 3 (2005): 369.
[118] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 1st American ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 29.
[119] Leal notes that wilderness and sea are linked within Hebrew history. Especially due to Isaiah 21:1 reference 'the wilderness of the sea'. See Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:40–41.
[120] Seth Kunin, "Judaism," in *Sacred Place*, ed. Jean Holm and John Bowker, Themes in Religious Studies (London; New York: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 121.

leaving the Wilderness symbolizes a metaphysical movement from the here and now to the timelessness of the Other or vice versa'.[121] Therefore, Israel as an agrarian community, situated predominantly in the hill country, is regarded as stable and ordered.[122] The borderlands of wilderness thereby protect and separate Israel from the chaos and 'Other World'. This is a key insight for understanding a biblical perspective of wilderness.

### 2.3.5 Wilderness: A Place of Curse and Death

Fifth, as the wilderness is a place with minimal water, little useful vegetation, exposed to the searing east winds[123] and not conducive to human civilisation, it is symbolically associated with death, judgement and curse.[124] The wilderness in its barrenness and desolation is described as 'the scene of utter cruelty'.[125]

The wilderness, as a place of judgement, punishment and death, is distinctly seen in the wilderness wanderings of ancient Israel during their departure from Egypt to their eventual entry into Canaan. The 'images of birth and of life belong to the realm of the Promised Land, not to that of the wilderness, the preeminent place of death. The wilderness barely sustains life'.[126] In fact, the punishment during the wilderness wanderings of Israel is cast in such a way, that 'by the end of Numbers, the wilderness has become the premier site of death, a symbolic space, juxtaposed in the starkest of

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[121] Leach, "Fishing for Men," 586.
[122] The inhabited territory, according to Eliade, is viewed as stable and ordered 'because it was first consecrated' (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 30).
[123] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 101.
[124] John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Revised. (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc, 2008), 33.
[125] Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif,'" 42.
[126] Adriane Leveen, "Falling in the Wilderness: Death Reports in the Book of Numbers," *Prooftexts* 22, no. 3 (2002): 262.

terms with its counterpart, the land promised Israel by God'.[127] In addition, the motif of murmuring and rebellion that Israel displays through their journey from the Reed Sea to the Promised Land occurs predominantly in the wilderness setting.[128] Expressly, 'The rebellion motif is characterised by Israel's rebellion against the leadership of Moses stimulated by the conditions of life in the wilderness and the community itself'.[129] Hence, the wilderness is viewed in this journey as a place of 'open rebellion',[130] curse,[131] judgement and death.

Also within the biblical canon, the prophets, especially those in the pre-exilic period, use wasteland and wilderness imagery to portray impending judgement and punishment.[132] The prophets proclaim that the land and the people will be returned to wildness, dryness and death, if the people do not return to Yahweh. When the people abandon the restraints of covenant and law, the consequences of this action are realised. Their land will return to its original state of barren, chaotic and dry desolateness.[133] It will no longer produce for them, and God will refrain from sending

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[127] Ibid., 247.
[128] 'Evidence of rebellion or murmuring motif extends from the Reed Sea event (Exod 13:17-14:31) to the last episode of rebellion recorded in Numbers 25:1-9, prior to the transition texts in Numbers 26. The murmuring motif, then, occurs primarily, but not exclusively, in those narratives that fall within the wilderness motif (Exod 13:17-Num. 21:9)' (Terry L. Burden, *The Kerygma of the Wilderness Traditions in the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Peter Lang, 1994], 40).
[129] Ibid., 40.
[130] Coats' form-critical examination of the murmuring motif within the wilderness traditions of the OT 'reveals that the murmuring motif is not designed to express a disgruntled complaint. Quite the contrary, it describes an open rebellion. The act of murmuring poses a challenge to the object of the murmuring which, if unresolved, demands loss of office, due punishment, and perhaps death' (George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968], 249).
[131] Pederson, comments in regards to the Pentateuch that 'for the Israelite the wilderness is the home of the curse' (Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, vol. I–IV [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959], 455).
[132] Wright, in line with our methodology where the landscape has an influence on the perception of events and biblical authors, states, 'It is the actual conditions of the desert which give rise to its symbolic use as a place where the judgement of God is carried out' (John Wright, "Spirit and Wilderness: An Interplay of Two Motifs within the Hebrew Bible as a Background to Mark 1:2-13," in *Perspectives on Language and Text* [Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1987], 273–274).
[133] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 91.

the waters in due season. This return to wilderness symbolises the devastation that has occurred in Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Explicitly, the *desert*-ion, ruin and drought-ridden lands are portrayed as the actions of God[134] in response to the disobedience of Israel.[135]

At this point, it is clear that there is a link between covenant-obedience, fertility and order, as well as covenant-disobedience with barrenness, destruction and wilderness. Specifically for Israel, the Law and covenant kept them as a people of God through the chaos and threatening forces of the wilderness. Thus, 'the stability of Yahweh's created order is dependent upon Israel's faithfulness to the covenant'.[136] However, when the covenant was disregarded or neglected, the wild-nature of the wilderness is drawn upon in judgement. Leal recognises that,

> For the Israelite, protection from the chaos that was manifested and symbolised by wilderness came from obedience to the Law. Respect for the Law had wide ramifications, the very existence of the nation depending upon it. Without the Law chaos would engulf Israel, and its territory would revert to wilderness.[137]

The abandonment of the protection that covenant brings is seen in Israel's historical retelling. For when the threat of wilderness and devastation fails to prompt Israel back into relationship with God, the ultimate decision is to expel Israel from the land and send her into the 'desert' of exile. This experience of exile is cast in destructive, pre-creation chaos[138] and wilderness-like images. As Brueggemann aptly states,

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[134] Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 928.
[135] For example: Jer 7:34; Jer 9: 10-13; Isa 42:15; Hosea 4:1b-3; Joel 1:6-7, 10-12; 17-18, 20.
[136] Michael DeRoche, "The Reversal of Creation in Hosea," *Vestus Testamentum* XXXXI, no. 4 (1981): 405.
[137] Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:75.
[138] 'It [the wilderness] is a space far away from ordered land. It is Israel's historical entry into the arena of chaos that, like the darkness before creation, is "formless and void" and without a hovering wind (Gen 1:2). Wilderness is the historical form of chaos and is Israel's memory of how it was before it was a created people' (Brueggemann, *The Land*, 28).

‘Wilderness is formless and therefore lifeless. To be placed in the wilderness is to be cast into the land of the enemy—cosmic, natural, historical—without any of the props or resources that give life order and meaning. To be in the wilderness is landlessness par excellence, being not merely a resident alien, as were the fathers, but in a context hostile and destructive’.[139] In this manner, ‘wilderness for the Hebrew came to be seen as *absence* of land’.[140] Thus, the wilderness was viewed in the biblical text as a place of great disorder, punishment, death and revulsion.[141]

### 2.3.6 Wilderness: A Negative Ancient Near Eastern Motif

Sixth, from the physical and social understanding of wilderness, the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature develops a mythological motif of the imagery of wilderness. Understanding the mythological backdrop can help to shed light onto the setting of the biblical text. This ANE literature typically portrays a negative picture of wasteland and wilderness; for example, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the wilderness is a place of no water, light, air or joy. Babylon-Assyrian mythology ‘associates the “mistress of the desert” (the sister of Tammuz) with the netherworld’.[142] Whereas in Ugaritic myth, ‘the desert or the netherworld is the natural habitation of Mot, the antagonist of creator-god Ba’al’, who can reduce the fertile earth to a place of waste and chaos.[143] In sum, the wilderness is viewed as a fearful and abandoned place. Thus, due to this identification ‘any equation of Yahweh with the wilderness is anathema to the Biblical writers’.[144]

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[139] Ibid., 28.
[140] Leal, “Negativity Towards Wilderness,” 370 (emphasis original).
[141] Mauser clearly summarises, ‘It must not be forgotten, that to the Old Testament as a whole, and to the prophets in particular, the desert is the place of judgement’ (Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 89).
[142] Talmon, “Miḏbār, ʾArāḇâ,” 114.
[143] Ibid., 114; Talmon, “The ‘Desert Motif,’” 43.
[144] Talmon, “The ‘Desert Motif,’” 43.

The OT supports these negative mythological associations with wilderness.[145] As the wilderness was 'associated with demons such as hairy satyrs, storm devils, howling dragons and winged night monsters. All this nightmarish brood was incorporated in the figure of Azazel'.[146] That is, in the ritual of the Day of Atonement (see Lev 16:8, 10, 26), a scapegoat, Azazel, carried the sins of the ancient Israel community into the wilderness. Thus, this symbolically guaranteed them life and atonement for the year. 'In this way clear links are established between wilderness, sin and evil, though there are no actual encounters with evil creatures'.[147] The ritual and associated myths, depicts the wilderness as a place of loss, curse and punishment.

### 2.3.7 Wilderness: A Place of Transformative Possibility to God

Seventh, from a different angle, the biblical authors additionally use the wilderness as a backdrop to the transformative capacity of God. That is, the 'most pronounced figurative use of wilderness is in contrast to fertile ground, and God's power is frequently described as being able to turn the one into the other'.[148] In multiple references, God is shown to transform the cursed or judged wilderness into fertile and water-filled spaces. Consequently, God's salvific agenda and ability is illustrated via the dry, wild wilderness places being changed into lush, vibrant and thriving landscapes.

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[145] Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 88.
[146] Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:68. Talmon also states, 'The presence of such monsters ['desert creatures', 'night creatures'] indicates that the wilderness yet persists in the primeval state of chaos of *tōhû wāḇōhû* (Dt. 32:10; Job 6:18f.; Isa.34:11; Jer. 4:23-26; cf. Ps. 107:10)' (Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 115).
[147] Leal, "Negativity Towards Wilderness," 369.
[148] Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 950.

The ultimate manner in which this is narrated is through ancient Israel's initial creation accounts. God's creative ability transforms the most chaotic, dark and sterile places into a place of beauty, abundance and productivity. That is, the dark, chaotic and watery wilderness of Gen 1 is transformed into the form and function of creation. Or the barren and waterless earth of Gen 2 is transformed into a fruitful garden to which the rains and humans are sent to work. Moreover, God's Law and the boundaries that it establishes create ongoing order and fruitfulness.[149] Indeed, obedience to the Law makes the land harmonious, whereas disobedience to the Law reverts the land to its wasteland, trackless and chaotic nature (as was noted in the previous section).

Further, God's ability to transform, even the most seemingly godforsaken places, is depicted in the many occasions that water or food is provided in the wilderness. This provision is seen in incidences such as Hagar's, Israel's journeying in the wilderness, through to Elijah.[150] Similarly, the prophets articulate the great creative reversal that will occur with the Messiah, for there was a historical expectation that the messiah-figure would come from the wilderness to transform and redeem his people.[151]

> The prophets felt that most of Israel's religious troubles began with the settlement of Canaan and apostasy to Canaanite idolatry, but they also looked forward to a renewed pilgrimage in the wilderness (Hos. 2:14–15; 9:10, cp. Deut. 32:10; Jer. 2:2–3; 31:2–3). There would be a new exodus after the Babylonian exile through the north Syrian Desert to make the Lord their king and "prepare his way" (Ezek. 20:30–38; Isa. 40:3–5).[152]

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[149] Pedersen states, 'Creation consists in establishing lawfulness out of confusion, and for the Israelites this becomes: to create habitable land out of desert land, light out of darkness, a continent out of an ocean' (Pedersen, *Israel*, I–IV:472).
[150] See for example, Gen 16:7-16; 21:14-21; Exod 15-17; 1 Kgs 19:3-18.
[151] Stephen D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 267–268.
[152] Matheney, "Wilderness," 1672–1673.

Specifically, Deutero-Isaiah portrays Israel walking through the wilderness in 'powerful antithetic phrases'.[153] 'Everything in the nature of the desert which is troublesome for the journey of the redeemed will be transformed into a condition ensuring an easy passage'.[154] God will create smooth paths to walk upon, reduce the mountains, provide pools of water and shady trees in the arid landscape, and the wild beasts will not harm the travellers.[155] The wilderness will be turned into a paradise, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden (Isa 51:3).

Overall, God's salvific purposes are showcased via the transformation of the most chaotic and godforsaken places into places of paradise and beauty.

### 2.3.8 Wilderness: A Liminal Place

Finally, the wilderness setting is used to describe the liminal experience, or the 'betwixt and between' time of Moses, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and Israel's sojourn after the exodus.[156] Within the studies of rites of passage,[157] the liminal phase refers to the transition stage, where profound changes and experiences occur. The space of the wilderness and time in the wilderness is viewed as liminal, because first, people leave their previous security and comforts, and being separate, need to rely on God's faithfulness. Second, it is a time where they experience the power and presence of God directly. The wilderness as a liminal time provides the 'opportunity

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[153] Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 51.
[154] Ibid.
[155] See for example, Isaiah 35:1-9; 40:3-4; 41:17-20; 43:19-20; 49:10-11.
[156] See for example Exod 2:16-4:20; 1 Sam 21-23; Matt 3:1; Matt 4:1-11; Gal 1:15-18; Exod 14-40.
[157] Rites of passage, as the field of ritual studies articulate, usually involve (1) a time of separation, (2) the transition or *limen* stage and (3) a re-negotiation of their new status back into society. See for more information, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

to have previous patterns of attitude and action deconstructed and disempowered so that one can more truly come to find God as the true and ultimate source of security and life'.[158] Paradoxically, a new encounter with God is typically found in the transition period between leaving the old and entering the new, and is accompanied by vast uncertainty and unfamiliarity. Thus, the wilderness becomes more than a location but 'a symbol of formative events'.[159]

Regarding the characteristics that mark the wilderness as a liminal place, Cohn aptly articulates:

> The combination of positive and negative characteristics makes the wilderness period an ambiguous place and time, and it is precisely ambiguity that is typical of phenomena of transition, of threshold beings. The wilderness is "betwixt and between," neither here not there, neither Egypt nor Canaan. It is outside of civilisation, remote, harbouring the scared both divine and demonic. Furthermore, the time spent in the wilderness is "a moment in and out of time." The past is wholly cut off, and the future but faintly envisioned. Slavery is over but freedom is not yet. … The wilderness forms the setting for a trek through a time and space apart, ambiguous, liminal.[160]

Hence, it is ambiguity of place, time and status that the wilderness trek harbours and results in it being viewed as liminal.[161] So much so, that as a 'powerful and ambivalent symbol' the wilderness wanderings are viewed as 'a normative period, a period of

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[158] Anne Franks and John Meteyard, "Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-between Places," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 3 (2007): 219.
[159] Lynne Wall, "Finding Identity in the Wilderness," in *Wilderness: Essays in Honour of Frances Young*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 67.
[160] Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion 23 (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1981), 14.
[161] Within the OT, the predominant liminal time is Israel's separation from Egypt and crossing into the Promised Land. Israel is depicted via the threshold of liminal wilderness, in transition from being slaves to becoming God's people, or transition from a negative setting (bondage, exile) to a positive setting (promised land). Specifically, Cohn details that the Israelites passed through the three rites of passage within the wilderness tradition: '(1) separation, the exodus from Egypt in which the crossing of the Red Sea marks the final break … ; (2) *limen*, the transitional period of wandering for forty years; (3) reincorporation, the crossing of the Jordan river, conquest, and settlement in the new land' (Ibid., 13). In this rite of passage for Israel, the wilderness is the transition threshold or *limen* that (re)forms Israel into a new phase. Thus, the wilderness in the exodus tradition 'is a launching pad for God-Israel transactions in an environment of acute risk and deep jeopardy' (Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 1st ed. [Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 59).

disobedience, a period of young and devoted love and a period expressing an ideal'.[162] The wilderness wanderings shattered human dependencies, culture and domesticities and brought the people to a transformative experience of the Holy.[163] This theme, especially of the wilderness as a place of 'critical encounter',[164] is repeated throughout the canon as a powerful symbol.

### 2.3.9 Summary: Literary Associations of Wilderness

In summary, the wilderness symbolises many differing vistas with its diverse literary associations. In fact, 'the wilderness is an ambivalent image in the Bible. If it is a place of deprivation, danger, attack and punishment, it is also the place where God delivers his people, provides for them and reveals himself'.[165] There is an interchange in the concepts of fertility versus sterility, chaos versus order and life versus death in the literary associations that surround wilderness, wasteland, desert and their synonyms.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION: A WORKING DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS

In creating a working definition of wilderness, I conclude that wilderness will designate those spaces that are isolated, arid, barren and marginal. These four terms will form the general map for an overarching model to define wilderness for ancient Israel; for, as it has been shown, wilderness does encompass a variety of terrains, inhabitants and uses. Hence, a broad model for classifying wilderness is required.

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[162] John W Rogerson, *The New Atlas of the Bible* (London: Macdonald, 1985), 117.
[163] Kip Redick, "Wilderness as Axis Mundi: Spiritual Journeys on the Appalachian Trail," in *Symbolic Landscapes*, ed. Gary Backhaus and John Murungi (New York: Springer, 2008), 70.
[164] See Chapter 5 'Critical Encounter in the Wilderness', Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:97–134.
[165] Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 951.

First, wilderness is isolated. It is remote, lonely and solitary, predominantly due to its ruthless landscape. It is difficult to survive in the harsh climate of the wilderness; thus few people live there. Hence, it is rare to find permanent dwellings in this location. The few people who do reside in the wilderness are those no longer welcomed by normal society. They mostly live a nomadic/semi-nomadic lifestyle following the seasonal patterns of the wilderness to eke out their survival. Further, the wilderness is isolated from the rest of civilisation. As humans sparsely inhabit the wilderness, the wilderness is identified as isolated, and the haunt for wild animals and mythological creatures.

Wilderness is arid. No matter what the terrain—Cenomanian limestone, Senonian chalk, sand dunes or volcanic rock—the wilderness landscape is characterised by little to no annual rain. Without the life-giving essence of water, wilderness is a place both physically and metaphorically, of death, curse and ruin. Water is essential for the life of humans, domestic animals and crops, as such only uniquely adapted wild people, animals and plants can flourish there.

Wilderness is barren. Wilderness places, as previously mentioned, do not receive adequate rainfall and are arid. Further, the types of wilderness soils are less able to hold what little moisture there may exist, compared to the fertile soils of Canaan's agricultural lands. Consequently, as it is futile to use the ground for any persistent agricultural use, it remains uncultivated. In stating this, the wilderness may comprise of seasonal grazing vegetation for flocks. The distinction is that it cannot be utilised by farmers for agrarian use. This is noteworthy, for within the OT an agricultural existence is the ideal norm for Israel. Thus, wilderness is perceived as the place that is

barren and of no value, due to its untameable and unusable nature by humans for agriculture. It is accordingly an uncivilised and unyielding land.

Wilderness is lastly, a marginal space. The wilderness acts as a buffer zone, a liminal space, as well as a place outside the margins of civilised life. Israel is surrounded by wilderness regions, from the Sinai, Negeb and Arabah in the south to the Judean and Asedot deserts in the east. Thereby, the specific geography of Israel utilises the wilderness as a natural buffer zone to any invading enemies. Wilderness areas are also a buffer between the domestic agricultural lands and the true desert areas; it is the marginal drift land. Further, this conception of wilderness—at the margins—is unique and influential to the self-identity of Israel.[166] The fertile grounds are central and wilderness is the outer realm. Therefore, this outside space is conceptualised for Israel as the place where danger, chaos, enemies and cursedness are found.

In conclusion, wilderness will be categorised for this thesis as an isolated, arid, barren and marginal space. In the next chapter, this definition will be used specifically as I examine the geographical markers within the Exodus wilderness theophany texts of Exod 3:1-4:17, Exod 19:1-20:21, Exod 24:9-18, and Exod 33:18-34:8. In the subsequent chapters, these defining terms will continue to be used as I discuss the narrative characterisation of Yahweh and why Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness setting.

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[166] By comparison, in Australia the wild desert areas are internal and centrally located. Hence, Australians view wilderness, the red desert, as being a core element to their identity – the sacred centre. However, there are shifts presently within studies of Australian spirituality that propose the place of the seascape as significant. See Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud, "The Sacred Edge: Seascape as Spiritual Resource for an Australian Eco-Eschatology," *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 6, no. 1/2 (2001): 167–185..

# CHAPTER 3: THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE WILDERNESS

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

To address the thesis question of 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?', I will now turn to explore the setting and geographical elements as per Beck's methodology within the four selected wilderness theophanic passages (1) Exod 3:1-4:17, (2) Exod 19:1-20:21; Exod 24:9-18,[167] and (3) Exod 33:18-34:8. This exploration is important to set the scene before reviewing Yahweh's actions and words in the wilderness context. Expressly, the chapter aims to determine the influence of the landscape, particularly to identify and elevate the geographical elements within the Exodus theophanic passages, as well to show how the narrator uses the wilderness setting to inform the development of the message and characterisation of Yahweh.

This chapter, accordingly, will first, discuss the explicit geographical markers in the passages, assess their relevance and observe how the geography sets the scene of the theophanic experience. In addition, this chapter will seek to engage the subtle references to geography, landscape and setting, to consider how these factors layer the message of the text and bolster the substance of its message. The reason for this two-fold approach is that the setting of the theophanic location 'is not simply a formal requirement of the narrative structure, but is essential to the purpose and experience of

[167] Please note that due to literary nature of the Sinai pericope, I will at times examine the passages of Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18 together, especially when themes are similar to avoid repetition. However, there will be instances where it is of benefit to assess the passages individually. The treatment will depend on the task at hand. For this chapter, they will be discussed together.

the theophany that follows'.[168] Hence, this chapter will move beyond the description of the formal setting of the passages to engage how the setting is deeply involved in the experience of Yahweh's appearance.

Due to the limitations of space, this engagement will not be exhaustive but aims to be illustrative of key themes. Further, the analysis seeks to lay a foundation to understand the interplay, if any, between the landscape and the behaviour and words of the characters, especially Yahweh, which the subsequent chapters of the thesis will investigate. To this end, therefore, each passage Exod 3:1-4:17, Exod 19:1-20:21; Exod 24:9-18, and Exod 33:18-34:8 will be explored in reference to (1) the explicit geographical markers and (2) the broader landscape and geographical themes that underpins the text.

### 3.2 EXODUS 3:1-4:17: THE LANDSCAPE OF THE BURNING BUSH

Within the first passage, Exod 3:1-4:17, the narrator is very explicit to show that the encounter of Moses occurred in the space of the wilderness. Exod 3:1 sets the scene for the encounter Moses will have with God at the burning bush. In Exod 3:1-4:17, there are three geographical descriptors used to outline the setting of the theophanic encounter. In this section, I will draw out the significance of these geographical depictions in developing the message of the narrative. Subsequently, I will examine: (1) Moses not just being in the wilderness but on the 'far side' of the wilderness, (2) Moses coming to 'Horeb' and finally, (3) Moses being at the 'mountain of God'. Furthermore, I will go on to explore the broader narrative theme of (4) the wilderness

[168] George Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," *Prooftexts* 23, no. 2 (2003): 128.

being described as ‘a holy place’ and its significance to the theophanic appearing of God.

### 3.2.1 אחר: Behind and Beyond

To commence the discussion of the Exod 3:1-4:17 narrative and the pertinent geographical references, Exod 3:1 states that Moses ‘led the sheep to the backside (אחר, *’ahar*) of the wilderness’. This phrase ‘the backside of the wilderness’ is an unusual location marker. In fact, the Hebrew preposition אחר has puzzled translators, with various translations proposed; the *backside* (KJV) of the desert, *far side* (NIV) of the wilderness, *beyond* (NRSV) the wilderness, *farthest end* (JPS) of the wilderness, or even to the *west*[169] (ESV) of the wilderness. This demonstrates that pinpointing an exact lexical meaning is difficult. Yet I would argue that the ambiguity of אחר assists to emphasise the mysterious nature of this theophanic event in Moses’ life. Therein the author prevents the encounter being restricted to a specific location or even meaning.

First, the phrase אחר indicates that Moses was not on his customary sheep-faring route in familiar Midianite territory.[170] As Durham has expressed, ‘He had driven the sheep well into the wilderness, perhaps even “beyond” or “behind” his customary routes. The whole impression is of a completely new, strange and distant place, one outside the familiar Midianite territory’. Houtman would concur, stating, ‘one day, looking

[169] ‘In Semitic thought, one faces east when giving compass directions; “behind” is therefore “west”’ (R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973], 62). Also Walter C. Kaiser notes that ‘since the orientation of the Midianites was to face east, the *’ahar* (lit. “back”) would be the west’ (In Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 2:317).
[170] It should also be noted that Moses leading the flock away from the camp of Jethro indicates that over the last years Moses had integrated with Jethro’s family and was trusted with the family’s wealth.

for new grasslands, Moses had taken his flock to a, for him, unknown area'.[171] It does not necessarily suggest that Moses went to a dry wasteland; instead מדבר as noted in the previous chapter, indicates an uncultivated, remote pastureland.[172] What it does propose is that Moses had ventured further than normal. He was (as an Australian would put it) *outback*—out the back of beyond.

Second, the wording of אחר signposts the transition that Moses is about to experience, as well as highlighting the author's expectation that something transformative is occurring. The geography of Moses' life expressly displays the radical break that Moses is undergoing in the 'אחר' wilderness. In sum, Moses' life began when as a baby he is drawn from the life giving Egyptian waters. From here he was taken into the heart of civilisation represented by growing up in the Pharaoh of Egypt's home. Later in life, he flees Egypt and its trappings to dwell in a priest's household in Midian. Forty years later he is portrayed at the far side of the wilderness.[173] Through the physical movement of Moses into different spatial settings—Egypt, Midian and the unknown wilderness—the separation from both his 'familial framework'[174] and also socio-religious-political framework is clear. The Egyptian water-boy, who became the Midianite shepherd son-in-law, is now becoming a wild-deliverer through

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[171] Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 334.

[172] Further, Hamilton notes that 'this territory can hardly be "desert" proved by Exod 33:3, which in speaking of the same area has God say to Moses, "Not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain." So Moses is, geographically, out of his comfort zone' (Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011], 45). Even so, it is still an isolated and marginalised space.

[173] Although Young would comment that if Mt Horeb is linked to Jebel el-Musa or Jebel el-Sufasfeh, it would be to the well-watered plain of Er-rarah that he could have been heading towards. See Edward J. Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," *Westminster Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1967): 1. This is difficult to ascertain from the text itself.

[174] Savran states that the term אחר portrays Moses' separation from his familial framework. 'The phrase indicates the far part of the desert, and serves as the mark of separation between the family (A) and the mountain of God (C)' (George Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* [London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2005], 36). All of which is part of the preparation for a theophanic type-scene encounter.

this ‘אחר’ wilderness experience with Yahweh. The wilderness therefore, becomes a fulcrum between significant seasons of Moses’ life. The contrast between these seasons of his life is evident as ‘Moses, the man associated with water from infancy on, now encounters the God of all creation in the dry desert, and in flame’.[175] To this end, the narrator(s) clearly demarcate that Moses was not just in the wilderness of his normal shepherding haunts, but he was at the backside, even the ‘godforsaken’ part of the wilderness. Through the different geographical settings, the exceptional transition of Moses into a new sphere and function of his life is portrayed. He is separated from his previous social and family connections, poised to connect with Israel, their God and become their deliverer to another geographical setting; a land of milk and honey.

Third, Moses is displayed as journeying to the back of beyond. He is on-his-way ‘behind’ or ‘to the farthest end’ of the wilderness.[176] The אחר is not the final location for him. Even so, the narrator takes the time to note it. In this way, the text builds the tension as Moses approaches Horeb specifically utilising אחר ‘backside’ that is ‘wonderfully apposite for the metaphysics of encounter with the divine’.[177] Yet it is on-the-way, in the very wilderness, out the back, that Moses encounters Yahweh God face to face. In this journey of being in unfamiliar territory, out of normal routine and on-the-way, Moses sees and experiences the un-normal like no other place.

In sum, the geographical phrase ‘אחר’ is used purposefully to indicate that the theophanic encounter of Exod 3 is not a normal event in the life of Moses. First, this

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[175] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 318.
[176] There is a similarity to other narratives, where the characters are in between destinations. For example, Hagar was on-her-way fleeing presumably to Egypt when she encountered Yahweh in the wilderness (Gen 16:6-7). Moses is likewise on-his-way in the wilderness, so to will Israel where they will all encounter God.
[177] Robert P. Carroll, “Strange Fire: Abstract of Presence Absent in the Text: Meditations on Exodus 3,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 61 (1994): 41.

is an extraordinary encounter, made all the more astonishing by occurring in the outback or back of beyond. Second, the location of an אחר wilderness theophanic encounter marks a pivotal transition in Moses' life, from being a Midianite shepherd to becoming Israel's deliverer. And third, אחר is not the final destination for Moses; indeed paradoxically, he will encounter God face to face in this back-place.

### 3.2.2 Horeb

Second, in paying attention to the geographic setting of Exod 3:1-4:17, it is essential to explore the reference to Horeb. In Exod 3:1 Moses 'came to the mountain of God, to Horeb'. This section will thus examine the term 'Horeb' and the next will examine the phrase 'mountain of God'.

Historically, Horeb has generally been viewed as a synonym for Sinai, where Horeb has been attributed to the Elohistic (E) and Deuteronomistic (D) document and Sinai to the Yahwistic (J) and Priestly (P) document.[178] In relation to their geography though, there is no distinguishable differentiation between the two terms in the text. Although, some have argued that it is the same mountain range with Horeb or Sinai (or vice versa) being the highest peak.[179] For our purposes, the geographical location is not clearly identifiable. This is further indicated by the locative ה- being used in the Hebrew text, so the verse can also be read as 'Horeb-ward' or that Moses was at the

[178] Edwin Yamauchi, "Ḥārēḇ," ed. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 319.
[179] Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 38. Furthermore, 'Horeb and Sinai may be identical. Alternatively, Horeb may refer to the wilderness region and Sinai to the mountain peak itself, or vice versa, or Horeb may be a range and Sinai a particular peak within it. The location of the mount cannot be settled with certainty because no early traditions about it have survived, and the folklore that places it where St. Catherine's Monastery is situated is very late, being post Christian, and of little historical value' (Ibid.).

mountain of God 'in the direction of Horeb'.[180] What is certain though, is that the name used in Exod 3:1 is Horeb, not Sinai. Thus, an examination of why *Horeb* is used, through our narrative-geographical lens in the encounter between Moses and God, will be briefly contemplated.

The name Horeb is from the root חרב *(ḥārēḇ)* that signifies dryness, drought, heat and desolation.[181] In the text some commentators have captured this emphasis by translating Horeb as the 'Desolate Waste'[182] or the 'Parched Mountain'.[183] Hereby, the rugged wilderness elements are reinforced as the setting for Yahweh's encounter with Moses. This is surely unusual, for ancient gods typically associate themselves with flourishing and beautiful mountains, or at the very least a mountain with a unique identifying feature. But what is described is a non-specific 'Desolate Waste' or 'Parched Mountain', deep in the inhospitable wilderness; an unlikely place to encounter God. Horeb therefore juts out in the text in contrast to Moses' water-rich origins. Yet, it also creates a place of wonder and awe, as Moses will meet with God at this most unlikely mount, a dry place in the wilderness.

### 3.2.3 Mountain of God

Third, to continue the discussion regarding the place where Moses encounters God, not only is he in the wilderness but he has come 'to the mountain of God' (Exod 3:1). With this statement, the narrator subtly sets the scene for what is to occur. The reference to a mountain especially a 'mountain of God' alerts the reader that

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[180] John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Electronic edition., vol. 3, World Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 1998), 28.
[181] Yamauchi, "Ḥārēḇ," 319.
[182] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:27.
[183] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 318.

something significant is about to occur. This is because mountains are generally 'coterminous in ancient Semitic culture with the presence of a deity'.[184] Ancient people considered mountains as 'numinous entities which filled them with trepidation and awe' and hence became deified and 'regarded as places where divine powers were present and active'.[185] Correspondingly, in ANE temple typologies, mountains are used to conceptualise the centre or axis of the universe for it is the place where heaven and earth meets.[186] Hence mountains are viewed as the place where God resides, and thus the reference to a 'mountain' in the text is likely used to preface Yahweh's appearance.

As a consequence of the link between mountains and places where God dwells, Meyers states that 'the initial revelation of Israel's deity must come at a mountain'.[187] In such a way, the narrative harnesses a pre-understanding to communicate an expectation that something significant is about to occur. However, Young would add as a point of clarification, that 'to assume that the mountain was regarded as a sanctuary even before the revelation to Moses is unwarranted. The designation, "mountain of God", is merely used by anticipation, and there is no reason for supposing that Moses was expecting a revelation or that he came to seek such'.[188] I agree with Young, for Moses is depicted toiling at the ordinary task of shepherding,[189] not on a spiritual pilgrimage. Yet I would state that the label 'mountain of God' is

[184] Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52.
[185] Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:19.
[186] Meyers, *Exodus*, 53; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 121–124.
[187] Meyers, *Exodus*, 52.
[188] Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," 1–2; See also Hamilton, *Exodus*, 45.
[189] The use of a *qal* active participle denotes the continuing occupation of shepherding that Moses was engaged in as his primary focus. See Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," 1.

used ‘to create suspense’[190] for both the author(s) and readers, as they would be familiar with the importance of mountains. As the text is read forward (and later backward), Horeb is to be viewed as ‘*become*[ing] God’s mountain, because of what He did and said there: this is a dynamic and not a static concept’.[191] As such, the mountain imagery is used to cultivate the narrative’s expectation of God’s appearance.

Furthermore, whilst mountains are viewed as sanctuaries, they are also viewed by ancient people as uninhabitable rugged places full of dangers, threats and death, even though places of divine powers.[192] The geographical imagery of ‘mountain’ that fosters unease and apprehension is juxtaposed against the phrase ‘mountain of God’ (Exod 3:1). Hence a contrast is developed which engages the foreboding nature of the landscape and mountain.[193] In a similar fashion this could also capture the near but elusive nature of God. Did Yahweh, therefore, appear to Moses in the vast, craggy, wilderness landscape, precisely because the location portrays the diversity of God’s character? This is a proposal that this thesis will continue to explore.

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[190] Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:335.
[191] Cole, *Exodus*, 63 (emphasis original). Alternatively, Wellhausen would suggest that the mountain of God ‘Mount Sinai’ was important before the specific encounters of Moses and Israel. He states, ‘The true and original significance of Sinai is quite independent of legislation. It was the Seat of the Deity, the sacred mountain, doubtless not only for the Israelites, but generally for all the Hebrew and Cainite (Kenite) tribes of the surrounding region’ (Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* [Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885], 343–344). I would disagree with this comment, due to the way the text purposefully shows that Moses was shepherding and not on pilgrimage. Moses’ encounter with Yahweh is depicted as unexpected.
[192] Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:19.
[193] For example, Lane proposes, in reference to Mount Sinai, that ‘Sinai—the desert and the mountain—is a symbol of fierce majesty, a landscape of terror and theophany, where Yahweh is met in the darkness of unknowing. It demonstrates the enormous energy that landscape metaphors in general are able to exert on the human imagination’ (Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 100).

### 3.2.4 Wilderness: A Holy Place?

Fourth, to move beyond the definitive geographical markers in Exod 3:1-4:17 to a broader theme in the passage, what stands out is that God describes the place where Moses stands as 'holy ground' (Exod 3:5). This phrase is unusual; especially as this is Yahweh's first disclosure to Moses in the encounter, after Yahweh is satisfied that he has Moses' attention through the burning bush and the calling out of his name '*Moses, Moses'* (3:4). The back-of-beyond wilderness place becomes designated as holy ground. This is seemingly absurd, for the wilderness setting is not typically linked with holiness. If anything, the wilderness represents 'the very antithesis of holiness, and even of reality. It was a "non-place"'.[194] If this deep wilderness space was seen as a sanctuary or religious site, then one should 'not use the holy place for a grazing ground'.[195] But as Moses' actions clearly show, he was shepherding his sheep and was not aware of the holiness of the ground, even with the flaming bush, until Yahweh speaks.[196] When Yahweh does speak, a 'paradoxical scene, where God demands respect by being clean in the midst of dirt and dung'[197] is created; holy ground in the midst of the wilderness.

Specifically, by allocating the ground as holy, a new 'space' is created.[198] This is clearly indicated through the words utilised in Exod 3:5, all of which have a high

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[194] Nicolas Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986): 362.
[195] Etan Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," *Reconstructionist* 36, no. 14 (1971): 28.
[196] Young specifically comments: '[T]o assume that the mountain was regarded as a sanctuary even before the revelation to Moses is unwarranted. The designation, "mountain of God", is merely used by anticipation, and there is no reason for supposing that Moses was expecting a revelation or that he came to seek such' (Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," 1–2). See also Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 305 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 28–29.
[197] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 636.
[198] 'Moses is being asked to consider that now, with the speaking of the divine voice from the bush, a new category has entered the world: a boundary to mark those places and spaces in which God is so

frequency within the OT as technical terms related to holiness and the cult. First, the verb קרב (*qal yiqtol*) is used to forbid Moses approaching too close to the bush.[199] This is a term that 'is frequently used in the OT as a technical term to describe an approach to the Presence of God in worship'.[200] Second, Moses is informed that this *place* (מקום, *māqôm*) where he has drawn aside is distinct, as the word מקום is typically used in biblical Hebrew to refer to a sanctuary or holy place.[201] And third, the *place* of the burning bush in the wilderness is further demarcated as *holy ground* (אדמה קדש).[202] The use of the term *holy* confirms that this is sacred space and hence, not to be treated normally or irreverently. Furthermore, the significance of 'holy ground' is accentuated in this passage, as this is the first time the root קדש has been used as a noun in the canon.[203] In addition, this phrasing is said of no other location in the Bible.[204] Thus, through the repetition of technical worship terms plus the emphasis on holiness, the writer(s) is separating a new space, stressing the unusual nature of this space, as well as enhancing the importance of the theophanic event.

present and those that he is not so present' (Oliver Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush: Voice, World and Holiness," *Modern Theology* 22, no. 3 [July 2006]: 441).

[199] Cole comments that 'Do not approach' could equally be translated as 'stop coming near, as you are doing' (Cole, *Exodus*, 65).

[200] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:31.

[201] Meyers, *Exodus*, 53. Cf. Gen 28:11, 19.

[202] This should not be translated as 'land of holiness' as some have done, for example (Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary [Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006], 115). However, as 'holy land' as per Waltke & O'Connor 'In adjectival prhases, the construct and genitive modify each other, one specifying the features of the other' (Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 148). In addition, the genitive 'holy' in this verse, expresses the 'attribute of a person or thing' (Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. Arthur E. Cowley [Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006], 417). See also John C. L Gibson and A. B Davidson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1994), 22; David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Sade - Resh*, vol. 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2010), 196.

[203] Previously the root קדש has only been encountered in Gen 2:3 but this in verbal form, 'to sanctify'. (Cole, *Exodus*, 65.)

[204] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:115.

Expressly, what is emphasised is that the place—far side, *horeb*, wilderness space—is deemed holy because of God's purpose, presence and actions.[205]

> That which is an ordinary part of the natural order is sanctified, set apart for special use by God. This setting apart was not only for this occasion but also for the future. God's appearance to Moses established Sinai/Horeb as a sacred place (cf. 3:12; Gen 28:16-17). God draws a particular plot of ground, an aspect of the creative order, into a new sphere of relationship; nature too is affected by and serves as an instrument for the divine presence and purpose.[206]

Brueggemann concurs, stating that 'the presence transforms everything at hand, including the place and the conversation'.[207] Thus, both the land and Moses are drawn into a new relationship with God. If God can transform the אדמה into holy ground, he can likewise transform the אדם into something extraordinary.[208]

Moreover, this theme of holiness fashions an etiology of what will become central for the people of Israel, as condensed in their holy encounter at Mt Sinai.[209] God will be with them, transforming a slave people into a holy nation; they will become holy, as God is holy. Israel's lives, actions and community will reflect this conversion as highlighted in the covenant, sacrificial system as well as the holiness code. So much so, Davies comments, 'The speaking of the divine voice then has significance not only for setting Israel apart as the chosen people of God, but also for shaping the world as a place where Israel's destiny, and ultimately human destiny, before God

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[205] For as Fretheim aptly states: 'There is no holiness inherent in the place as such, no natural sanctity, but that which is not holy now becomes so by virtue of the divine purpose for the place (not just the divine presence)' (Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991], 56).

[206] Ibid., 56–57. As an aside I also like how Davies notes, 'We are thus forced to confront the ever-present possibility of holiness within the domain of our ordinary sensibility' (Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 446). As is observed here, God's presence and holiness is not limited to or by certain spaces; he can sanctify any realm.

[207] Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles on the Bible, General Articles on the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, the Book of Exodus, the Book of Leviticus.*, ed. Neil M. Alexander, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 712.

[208] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 49.

[209] Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 1 (1998): 126.

may be fulfilled'.[210] Likewise, God's voice apportions this wilderness land as holy and it is a demarcated space where Moses' destiny is shaped.

After this event, it is noted that the *holy place* does not become a continuously separate place that has established sanctity.[211] The place is not holy because it is the mountain of God, but because of the proximity to the Holy-One's presence. Thus, 'the holiness derives solely from the immediacy of the Divine Presence and does not outlast the experience. Significantly, Moses conducts no cultic exercise there, and the site does not become a place of pilgrimage'.[212] Instead, the place becomes a transition place rather than a memorialised site. God is portrayed with Moses, rather than being with the mountain. Even so, the setting has a profound influence in the narrative, in showing the nature of Yahweh and how a so-called godforsaken wilderness place can be brought into God's redemptive purposes.

Finally, what is sometimes neglected in the discussion of setting, is that Moses is not aware of the importance of *this* place until the revelation of Yahweh occurs.[213] Moses came to this mountain located beyond the normal route, on the far side of the wilderness, outside the governing territory and any religious circles of both the Midianites and Egyptians.[214] Thus, 'unawares he enters the area of the mountain as if it were an ordinary mountain … Moses is depicted as the man to whom the character

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[210] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 446.
[211] Meyers, *Exodus*, 53.
[212] Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 40.
[213] Although in stating this, there is a possibility that there was an 'early tradition of locating Yahweh's mountain home in the desert… the desert homes of Yahweh preserve an early tradition of theophany and divine rescue, in which Yahweh would appear from this southern wilderness region to save Israel at the time of crisis' (Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," 123).
[214] Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:335. Further, Houtman states, 'Exodus does not produce the impression that Mt Horeb/Sinai was the holy mountain of the Midianites. The sacred nature of the mountain is revealed to Moses for the first time. The mountain is located outside of Midianite territory' (Ibid., 1:97).

of the place is being revealed'.[215] The narrative captures this profundity well. Until Yahweh speaks, Moses is oblivious to the significant geographical markers that create an atmosphere that fosters the transcendent.

### 3.2.5 Summary: Exodus 3:1-4:17

Overall, it is observed that the geographical markers of אחר, Horeb, and the mountain of God all generate the sense of separation from the normal and an expectation of the unusual. Moses is at the אחר of the wilderness, out in the dry, barren and *horeb* landscape, where he comes to a mountain, *the mountain of God*. In this way, 'In less than two lines the narrator signals strong connections between the story about to be told and the larger story that it introduces'.[216] Imaginations are captured, and the geographical markers indicate that Moses is isolated in the wilderness, beyond the very margins, and in this space he is drawn to the 'mountain of God'. Through this description, the stage is set for an experience with Yahweh. Furthermore, the paradox continues as God transforms the space into holy ground. The wilderness ground becomes unusually holy by Yahweh's presence, and thus, a place where both Yahweh and Moses can draw near. The transformation to the ground also subtly alludes to the wider transformative purposes of Yahweh, which will unfold as the narrative continues.

## 3.3 EXODUS 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18: THE LANDSCAPE OF MOUNT SINAI

In the second and third selected theophanic passages Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, the narrator is very precise to announce the geographical location of the event of the

[215] Ibid.
[216] Carroll, "Strange Fire," 41.

divine encounter. Israel has come to the Wilderness of Sinai. In fact, the reference to Israel being in the wilderness is repeated three times: twice as a proper noun 'Wilderness of Sinai' and the third time simply as the noun 'wilderness'. Israel has left Rephidim to enter the Wilderness of Sinai, where they are camped in front of the mountain. While the location itself cannot be traced accurately, this does not primarily interest us, as the aim is to pay attention to the narrative-geography influences.[217] To be distinct, what is pertinent is that the author has mentioned the 'wilderness' three times, indicating that the wilderness space is expressly being used to define the setting, both geographically and spatially, as well as to frame the narrative's message.

In this section, I will thus engage with two explicit geographical markers and how they are involved in the advancement of the text's message. The markers include (1) the Wilderness of Sinai and (2) the mountain of God. In addition, I will examine the broader geographical-narrative themes that aid the message of the theophany and its plot. Specifically, this examination will cover (3) the role of holiness within the narrative, and (4) the significance of a wilderness sabbath-space.

### 3.3.1 Wilderness of Sinai

To begin, the people of Israel have been travelling through the wilderness since the time that they commenced their exodus from Egypt (Exod 12), but in Exod 19:1, the narrator pointedly slows down the narrative by re-introducing the fact that they are in the wilderness. More precisely, that Israel is in the wilderness of Sinai (twice) and the wilderness in front of the mountain (once). The need to point out this information, in

[217] Although, Hamilton states that in avoiding the questions of 'where is Sinai?' and 'what day is the third full moon?' that 'Geography and chronology have taken a backseat to other more critical matters' (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 300).

repetition, seems redundant but the storyteller has prioritised this information. In evaluating this geographic information, especially with the Sinai Wilderness being 'a thousand kilometres of nothing'[218] the repeated space given to a geographical 'nothing' marker within the text is curious. However, I would argue that the narrator is cleverly setting the scene of this very significant passage within the canon for the following reasons.

First, the text is clearly linking these passages together with Moses' previous experience in the wilderness (Exod 3:1-4:17). In so doing, the text parallels Moses' experience with the Israelites, for just as Moses encountered God in the wilderness, had a profound revelation of Yahweh and was given a new identity, so too will the Israelites. Second, the wilderness is being portrayed as a liminal and even sacred space for the covenant relationship to be fully expressed. The wilderness is a place—betwixt and between—Egypt and Canaan, and as such, has ritual prominence. Third, the wilderness setting portrays that without the miraculous provision of water and food on behalf of God, the people would not have survived. There simply would not be enough food or water to sustain an assembled group of people.[219] Thus, the miraculous provision that is described in Exodus, as the people travelled, is an exemplar of God's divine and sustaining actions.[220] Examples of this miraculous provision borders either side of the theophanic encounter, and pictures how the

[218] Giovanna Magi, *The Peninsula of Sinai* (Firenze, Italia: Casa Editrice Bonechi, 1993), 4.
[219] 'A large number of men could not have existed in the southern deserts in one assembled group, but rather they were forced to scatter with their herds across the desert prairies over a wide area, just as Bedouins are accustomed to doing today' (Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 200).
[220] John A. Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey: An Introduction to the Geography of Israel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 133.

wilderness comes to life due to the presence of God.[221] Finally, the repetition within Exod 19:1-2 is used to dislocate the temporal sequence of the narrative. The forward reading pace is carefully suspended as the people of Israel camp in the wilderness of Sinai.[222] Therefore, like the people of Israel who stop at Sinai, the reader should likewise sojourn here and recognise the sacred space that is created in the text, as in the Sinai wilderness.

### 3.3.2 The Mountain

In addition, the people of Israel camp in front of 'the mountain' (Exod 19:2) in the Wilderness of Sinai. The narrator's meticulous mention of the mountain begins to set the scene for the theophanic occasion. In fact, there are many references to 'the mountain' in the passages Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, as much of the theophanic encounter takes place on its heights. Subsequently, 'the mountain' looms large in the geography, narrative and imaginations of this text, and warrants detailed discussion. This discussion will investigate this especially in respect to (1) the phrase 'the' mountain being used, (2) Israel being camped 'in front' of the mountain, (3) the mountain being a structuring device in the text and finally, (4) the mountain participating in the experience of God.

#### *3.3.2.1 'The' Mountain*

The phrase 'in front of *the* mountain' is used to set the scene in Exod 19:2 as the location for where Israel camps. In using the definite article to describe the mountain,

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[221] See especially the story of Marah (Exod 15:22-25a) and story of Kibroth-hattaavah (Num. 11). Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 133.
[222] Thomas B. Dozeman, "Spatial Form in Exod 19:1-8a and in the Larger Sinai Narrative," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 91.

it is assumed that the audience is familiar with which mountain is being described, for it is 'the' mountain. This conjures the foreknowledge of 'the mountain' being anticipated as the fulfilment of the promise given to Moses in Exod 3:12. It is 'the mountain' where Israel will worship God as freed people in peace, 'the mountain' where they will meet with God and hear the words that crafts them definitively into the people of God; this is '*the* mountain' of God. Thus, the mountain that thrusts large into the wilderness setting here in Sinai is positioned as the mountain that drastically intervenes into their story as the people of God.

Unusually, the term 'Mount Sinai', which 'the mountain' becomes identified with, is not used in the opening verses of this chapter. In fact it is used for the first time in this passage and the canon itself in Exod 19:12. Although it is natural to affirm that it is Mount Sinai due to the association of the mountain being 'there' in the wilderness of Sinai (19:2), I would suggest that the narrator(s) has preferred the indistinct phrase to the proper noun in initially setting the scene. The purpose of which was to engage the reader's imaginations to the wider narrative, and create suspense as to whether or not this is the anticipated mountain upon which the people of Israel will worship God in freedom (Exod 3:12). That is, has Israel truly arrived at the mountain of God that Moses previously experienced?

Consequently, when the mountain is named Mount Sinai in 19:12, the term Sinai (סיני) resounds purposefully, connecting the meaning and message of Moses' encounter with Yahweh in the bush (סנה) to their own anticipated encounter.[223]

[223] Noth states, 'when the story was later incorporated in the framework of the Moses tradition the word סנה was felt to contain an allusion to the name Sinai, with the result that the scene was subsequently

Thereby, the narrator conflates the texts together to draw out deeper meanings as well as generate expectancy. Furthermore, the mountain is associated with holiness (Exod 19:12-13) and the encounter with Yahweh (Exod 19:11), before being named Sinai. Thus, just like Moses standing on holy ground at the mountain and hearing God speak from the midst of the bush in Exod 3, the people of Israel are required to consecrate themselves and place limits on the sacred ground of Mount Sinai before they receive the words of Yahweh (Exod 19:10-13). Through this textual layering via similar terms,[224] the narrator moves beyond chiefly documenting a particular mountain, to casting a wider portrait of promise, sanctification and inclusion in the purposes of God.

Furthermore, the unlabelled mountain prevents it being localised to a particular mountain in a particular spot.[225] This is endorsed within the text, for the narrator is hesitant to reveal the features of the mountain. Instead, the mountain is covered by dense cloud, darkness and thick billowing smoke (for example, Exod 19:9; 16-19). Correspondingly, the mountain is envisioned as God's, and through this indeterminacy, the 'Hebraic tradition identifies Sinai not primarily with an earthly place but with a divine act'.[226] In this manner, readers are prompted to lift their reflections higher than the mountain itself, to the one who is identified as coming to meet the people on this mountain, Yahweh. Hence, the indefinite mountain name, its

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transferred to Sinai' (Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library [London: SCM Press, 1962], 39–40).

[224] In fact, it could be argued that different religious traditions have been brought together, ie 'mountain of God', 'Mount Horeb', 'Mount Sinai' in the phrase 'the mountain'. But examining the documentary-sources of these different traditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

[225] As noted previously, in section #3.2.3.

[226] Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 119.

soaring height and the cloud and smoke, which reveals yet conceals, all assist to illustrate the divine actions of freedom and authority[227] in this theophanic encounter.

#### *3.3.2.2 'In Front of' the Mountain*

Further, the people of Israel are camped 'in front of' the mountain.[228] Israel is clearly detailed as camping in connection to the mountain space as well as the wilderness space. That is, Israel is camped 'in front of' (נגד, *neged*) the mountain, or 'in opposition to' or 'against' or 'in front of' the mountain. The pause in Israel's travels and their residence is linked primarily to this mountain in the wilderness.

Accordingly, Israel's encampment in front of the mountain advances a unique contrast with Moses' burning bush experience. Moses was in the אחר, or out the back of the wilderness in his theophanic encounter, where Israel by comparison is נגד the mountain. In this way, Israel is positioned as poised and formally expectant. This understanding is developed further by the preparations they undergo to be consecrated for a significant encounter with Yahweh. By comparison, Moses' encounter is painted as unexpected, curious and surprising. In fact, the mountain fades into the background in the Exod 3:1-4:17 encounter, with the focus centred on the interaction between Moses and Yahweh albeit on the holy ground of the wilderness. Yet in Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, the mountain overshadows and remains a prominent feature of the

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[227] The indeterminate location of Sinai within the wilderness 'functions in Hebraic tradition as a symbol of both YHWH's freedom and YHWH's authority. Like Sinai, YHWH's domain is beyond the boundaries of Egypt, of Canaan, of any given regime or state, ancient or modern, that may be located on a map. Like Sinai, YHWH's authority is not confirmed by, indeed may stand in opposition to, the sovereignty claimed by any earthly kingdom' (Ibid.).

[228] Kaiser Jr notes that the desert in front of the mountain 'is called er-Raha (meaning "the palm [of a hand]"), in that it is a flat plain about five thousand feet above sea level that stretches over four hundred acres, almost like an amphitheatre, with additional areas in adjoining valleys' (Walter C. Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis - Leviticus*, Revised., vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008], 471). I find this description intriguing in line with Exod 33:22 where God will shield Moses with the palm of his hand.

theophanic encounter. In fact, as the narrative continues, the mountain will become a barrier between Israel and Yahweh, as Israel draws back from Yahweh and remains out the front of the mountain, never entering the 'backroom' or the אחר place of informal intimacy that Moses knew.[229] In this way, when we pay attention, the simple setting of the geographic locations can subtly indicate these different nuances within the encounters.

#### *3.3.2.3 The Mountain: A Structuring Device*

The wilderness mountain looms large in this section of the Pentateuch. In fact, it is used to set and structure the text in a variety of ways.[230] Expressly, in the first few verses Exod 19:1-3, God is associated with the mountain and its heights as he descends to 'the top of the mountain' (19:20; 24:17), Israel encamps in front of the mountain in the Wilderness of Sinai, and Moses is portrayed as moving between the two. Herein, the 'opening portrait indicates the important role of the mountain as the main structuring device' of the passage.[231]

Specifically, the theophany and 'drama of covenant unfolds'[232] through the movement of Israel between the earth (the formless wilderness) and heaven (the hidden mountain peak). The non-descript mountain is the bridge between these two spaces, where both

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[229] It is interesting to note that typically being in the presence of someone is described as 'toward the face of' in Hebrew (פנים). Yet, here in the wilderness, it appears that the norms are suspended, and instead of being 'before the face' that the 'back' place is prioritised in Exod 3:1-4:17 and 33:18-34:8.
[230] As Balentine notes, 'The events that transpire at Sinai occupy just one year out of the 2,706 years that the Pentateuch covers between the creation of the world and the death of Moses in the plains of Moab. In terms of the Pentateuch's own chronology, the year at Sinai might well have been allotted little more than a footnote in the overall story. But the Torah's vision is quite different. In its final arrangement, it understands the year at Sinai to be the constitutive experience in the formation of the community of faith as "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6)' (Balentine, *Torah's Vision*, 120).
[231] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 417.
[232] Ibid.

Moses and the people are invited to go up the mountain to encounter the descended God (19:13). However, when the people see God coming to the mountain in smoke, fire and thunderings, the mountain will become an impediment between Israel and God. As such, Israel will remain at a distance, separated from God, by the mountain. But the communication will continue via Moses, who ascends and descends on the same mountain.[233] Later, in Exod 24:9-18 the elders and Moses are invited to go up the mountain, but it is clear that the people of Israel were not included in this invitation. Thus, Moses is spatially allowed to go higher up the mountain than the elders as he may approach Yahweh, the elders also go up the mountain but are to remain at a distance compared to Moses, and the people may not ascend at all (Exod 24:1-2). In this way, the mountain that separates some people from God is the conduit for others to encounter God. Either way, as the pericope unfolds, the mountain remains central in defining the setting, focusing the narrative and spatially representing the different characters—God, Moses, the elders and Israel.[234]

In addition, the mountain in the wilderness landscape of Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, and God's association with it, forms an impressive, solemn and mysterious image. The mountain is portrayed as an image that is hidden in the clouds 'provoking as much confusion as it does insight—[it] is a metaphor of the effort to speak of God'.[235] Indeed it has been suggested that the mountain uniquely 'speaks of two things at once:

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[233] In the Sinai pericope of Exod 19:3-8a, the 'characters are juxtaposed to each other vertically, which defines their interrelationships spatially, in the context of Mount Sinai. By emphasizing the setting, spatial-form techniques have provided the narrative context not only to clearly locate characters within the setting but also to explore spatial relations between character, where Yahweh and Israel are separated by Mount Sinai and must communicate through Moses' (Dozeman, "Spatial Form in Exod 19:1-8a," 94).

[234] Furthermore, the tripartite division of the mountain is echoed in the three divisions within the tabernacle itself, where different people have access to the unique areas of the mountain, different people access the three specific areas of the tabernacle. See Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 391.

[235] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 102.

its own fierce, demanding presence as a physical form, and the notion of God's incomprehensible greatness. The mind struggles, uncomfortably and simultaneously, with these two juxtaposed images'.[236] In this way the geographical marker of a mountain, with its spatial heights linked to God, inspires the engagement and imagination of the reader.[237] The mountain looms overhead with unreachable dignity, it is beyond human control and its inaccessibility is a backdrop to human limits.[238] Israel is paused here, just like the text's forward momentum, camped at the mountain's front expectant of a connection being made, through a holy encounter with Yahweh.

#### *3.3.2.4 The Mountain Experiences God*

Finally, the mountain responds to the theophanic encounter alongside the people (Exod 19:18). The mountain is not just a location. Expressly, Mount Sinai is unusually personified in Exod 19:18. This is accentuated through the multiple references to the mountain: 'Mount Sinai' smoked, 'all of it', because Yahweh descended on 'it' in fire and 'the whole mountain' trembled violently. Further, the personification of Mount Sinai is displayed by its trembling (חרד), which is consistent with the trembling (חרד) that the people experienced (20:18).[239] Thus, when and where God is present, the elements cannot remain quiet or unmoved, for an 'upheaval of the

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[236] Ibid.
[237] Lane would argue that 'this enchantment with archetypal landscape forms—with invisible and inaccessible mountains—is a phenomenon as old as myth and as persistent as dream. The history of literature—and of religions—is filled with accounts of hidden peaks, unexplored rivers, imaginary deserts and lost islands … We have an insatiable thirst for creatures and places that don't exist … They symbolize states of growth we haven't yet achieved' (Belden C. Lane, "Imaginary Mountains, Invisible Landscapes," *Christian Century* 112, no. 2 [1995]: 46).
[238] Ibid., 48.
[239] James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2008), 176.

natural world that always accompanies Yahweh's coming' is captured.[240] Consequently, for Dozeman, the personification of Mount Sinai echoes the response of the people who likewise tremble in fear, but it also 'underscores its cosmic quality', for 'such a personification is unusual'.[241] Thus, in this unique way, the mountain reflects, participates and incorporates the actions within the text both of God and the people. In this manner, the mountain's role as the bridge between the place of earth and heaven, and consequently, the encounter between the people and God is reinforced.

#### *3.3.2.5 Summary*

To review, the mountain is a prominent geographical feature in Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, which is purposefully used to set the scene for the theophanic encounter between Israel and Yahweh. First, the text develops anticipation by describing it as 'the' mountain instead of Mount Sinai. Thus, both the readers and Israel wonder whether this is the place where they will encounter God? Second, a clear connection and contrast is developed to Moses' previous אחר theophanic encounter. This is because Israel camps 'in front of' the mountain, thoroughly prepares to meet with God and the mountain remains central in the narrative. Third, the mountain is a structuring device within the text to highlight different spatial areas and positions of the characters. That is, the mountain is spatially cast as a bridge or connection between earth and heaven. Therefore, Israel is invited from their position on earth to ascend partly up the mountain, while Yahweh is portrayed as descending to the

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[240] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:271. Alter also captures this nicely by commenting that when 'the celestial and terrestrial realms are brought into panoramic engagement, and as God comes down on the mountain, every sort of natural firework is let loose, so that the trembling seizes not only the people but the mountain itself' (Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 425).
[241] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 457.

mountaintop. Thereby, the characters are spatially connected via the mountain. In addition, Moses connects them both as he ascends and descends the mountain and is the mediator between the people and Yahweh. In this way, the mountain is vital in establishing the theophanic meeting between Yahweh and the people of Israel. Finally, the mountain experiences the theophanic encounter through its 'trembling' in response to Yahweh, just like the people's response. Overall, this wilderness mountain is essential in setting the theophanic encounter of Yahweh, as it fixes the structure and significance of the encounter. The mountain also perfectly connects a multitude of meanings, especially in how it reflects the grandeur, authority, holiness, distance and fierce nature of Yahweh.

### 3.3.3 Wilderness Mount: Holy

In moving beyond explicit geographical markers of the Wilderness of Sinai and the mountain, in the setting of the second and third selected wilderness theophanic passages (Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18) the theme of holiness arises again. Specifically, Moses is instructed by God to set bounds or limits of holiness on the mountain (Exod 19:12). This is in contrast to the burning bush scenario where Moses was not even aware of the limits or bounds that he was walking upon until God instructed him to come no further. Yet in Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, the people are instructed to foster holiness by the setting of limits on the mountain as well as by consecrating themselves. This section will explore the broader theme of holiness in the wilderness in these passages.

In examining the role of holiness in this section, five forms of the root קדש are used just in Exod 19.[242] Typically, they occur in the *Piel* stem that expresses the act, effect or causation of a state or condition.[243] Hence it typifies the people or even the mountain being brought into a consecrated or holy state (19:10; 14; 22; 23).[244] In this way, the people participate in activities, such as setting limits on the mountain, washing clothes and abstaining from sexual relations, to effect consecration. The requirements are more expansive by comparison to Moses at the bush, for a longer time period of consecration was enforced, and the people were required to purify themselves and their clothes, not just remove their sandals. Thus, the creation of the holy boundaries is purposefully defined for and employed by the people of Israel before Yahweh will descend to speak to them.

Although holiness barriers were eventually constructed, Moses 'went up to God' (19:3) before any distinctions were set in place in the narrative. He is portrayed as eagerly seeking out God once they had camped in the wilderness before the mountain. In return, God responds just as eagerly, as he 'called to him'. At this point in the narrative there is no evidence of Moses consecrating himself. What determines the holiness and the creation of the boundaries though, is the subsequent statements that God 'will *come to you* … so that the people will hear me speaking' (19:9) and 'the LORD *descended*' (19:18, 20). As I see it, there is a distinction developed in the text between God coming or God descending to the top of the mountain versus God

[242] The five occasions are Exod 19:6,10, 14, 22, 23.
[243] Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 398. In this case the *Piel* verb (a denominative) conveys the action of causing the state of holiness or consecration effecting both the people and mountain.
[244] Peter John Gentry, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170, no. 680 (2013): 405.

calling out or speaking to Moses. This is similar to what I confer from Gentry's notes in regards to Exod 3, where God is 'within the bush'

> God does not forbid Moses from approaching the holy ground but only from coming near the bush—the place from which He speaks. The ground designated as holy includes the precise place where Moses stands, not just the bush where Yahweh speaks. … The holy ground, then, is much larger than the bush where Yahweh speaks. It follows that the command that forbids Moses to approach does not apply to the ground declared "holy", but only to the precise spot where Yahweh speaks.[245]

Similarly, God is forbidding the people of Israel to push through the limits up onto the peak of the mountain, as this is the place from which Yahweh will descend and speak. But in this initial account, when Moses runs up the mountain and Yahweh calls out to him, a spatial distance is inferred as Yahweh is not fully revealed or manifested. Hence, no strict enforcement of the holiness barriers is necessary.[246]

Moreover, in reference to the purposeful creation of holy boundaries, the whole mountain, not just the peak (and even the people themselves)[247] is set apart as holy (19:23). It is God's coming down and his speaking, at this rugged wild mountaintop, which permeates the mountain with holiness. The people are invited onto the holy ground when they hear a long blast of the ram's horn (19:13). Thus, for Gentry, 'the ban on going up on the mountain does not imply a radical separation or barrier between the people and the mountain. On the contrary, the people are invited to participate in the theophany, not simply as spectators, but as consecrated. The place

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[245] Ibid., 402–403.

[246] In Source Criticism the different movements are typically assigned to different sources. However, this is fraught with great difficulty. Instead, as the text has been redacted with intent into a whole, the different movements need to be acknowledged for what they bring to the plot and the text's message.

[247] The correlation that is fostered in the text between the mountain and the people themselves is fascinating. As already noted, both the people and the mountain tremble in response to the Yahweh's theophany. Likewise, both the people and mountain are set apart as holy. They both are witnesses to this most profound event in Israel's formation and history. Therefore, what could be the reason for why the author has specifically developed these parallels between the mountain and the people? I would suggest that this indicates that what occurs at the mountain is not to remain there; in fact, the people of Israel are carriers of 'the mountain'. Just as a mountain interrupts and centres the geographical space, so too is this experience at the mountain meant to interrupt and centre the lives of the people.

*and* the people are ready to receive God because they belong to Him'.[248] Hence at the formless wilderness mount, holiness is fostered to invoke awareness that Yahweh wants to be present and speak to them, and this is not to be encountered naively.

In fact, the creation of the holiness boundaries fosters the following distinctions. First, the mystery, transcendence and otherness of God is maintained.[249] One can only enter into Yahweh's presence when he invites and chooses to reveal himself; he is not at their demand. Second, God is not domesticated or even friendly; his holiness and majesty requires respect. It can be dangerous, therefore, to enter his holy presence frivolously, presumptuously and without preparation.[250] Third, there is a distance between the Divine and humanity. Hence, bringing together the sacred and profane is especially dangerous, since Yahweh does not dwell on earth.[251] In this way, the bridge of the mountain depicts the sacred and profane uniting in a unique manner with holiness barriers installed to protect the union. Fourth, God preserves human freedom via the barriers. As Fretheim observes, if God was fully present it 'would be coercive; too direct a divine presence would annul human existence … God must set people at a certain distance from himself. The vision of God must be of such a nature that disbelief remains possible'.[252] Hence at Sinai, this human freedom is exhibited with

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[248] Gentry, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament," 407 (emphasis original).
[249] Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 504–505. See also the classical work of Rudolf Otto, who expresses similar ideas in reference to 'the holy' via his terminology of the *numinous* and *mysterium tremendum.* Via these terms Otto aims to articulate the incomprehensible experience of God, which transcends the rational, overwhelms the senses and captures the rapturous feelings (Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. [London: Oxford University Press, 1958]).
[250] As Lasine notes, at Sinai 'we are confronted with a concept of sacred soil which involves the danger of proximity to God and the holy. People who try to fight God or his wonder-working prophets on *this* soil—or who even contact the holy in all innocence—can end up like Nadab and Abihu, Korah, the citizens of Beth Shemes, Uzzah…' (Stuart Lasine, "Everything Belongs to Me: Holiness, Danger, and Divine Kingship in the Post-Genesis World," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 1 [2010]: 38).
[251] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 417–418.
[252] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 218.

the people making the choice to stay at a distance from the smoky, fiery mountain and to hear God indirectly.

Overall, all these factors correspond with the wilderness landscape, which is mysterious, dangerous and other-ly. This is why, I suggest, that the holy character of God (and likewise Israel) is emphasised in these passages. Holiness is not a settled or tamed characteristic; rather, it is demanding and awe-inspiringly beautiful. It is no wonder then that the craggy, untameable arena of the wilderness is chosen as the place for God to appear. Further, just as survival in the wilderness is rigorous and not easy, this intimate one-on-one relationship with God is being likewise framed as challenging. The use of the indistinct mountain as a bridge between the sacred heavens and dusty earth, far beyond the dynamics of civilisation, also profoundly crafts this as a unique holy encounter.

### 3.3.4 The Sabbath Space of the Sinai Wilderness and Mountain

Fourth, in a final geographical reflection on Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, the plot of the Book of Exodus slows when the people of Israel camp in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. In this apparently intentional move, the text emphasises the significance of the covenant vocation that is being instituted between Yahweh and the people. Specifically, Balentine proposes that this time at Sinai should be viewed as a 'sabbath day experience'.[253] This is due to the people's arrival at Sinai six weeks after the chaos of Egypt, and subsequently, this seventh week at Sinai 'becomes the focus of extended reflection; like the seventh day of the primordial week'.[254] The suspension of

[253] Balentine, *Torah's Vision*, 127.
[254] Ibid., 126.

time via the halting of the temporal sequence of the exodus narrative, alongside the pause in Israel's journeying to the Promised Land in this holy-wilderness space, becomes a significant junction for Israel's encounter with Yahweh. Similarly, as readers we should likewise slow our pace in reading and reflect on what is occurring at this Mount. The original Sabbath day, in both its holiness and deferral of time, is cleverly represented in this section of the text.[255] Thus, the people of Israel in the wilderness are portrayed in virtual time and space of rest or *sabbath.* This reinforces their covenantal relationship with Yahweh, for the work of deliverance is now complete.

Therefore, I would suggest on the basis of the texts engaged with so far that the wilderness geography is the innate landscape for representing sabbath-space.[256] This is due to the wilderness' natural fallowness and uncultivated state. It allows for one to pause and focus on what is central, in this instance, the holy mountain of God. Specifically, this rest is further accented during Israel's sojourn, in which there is an absence of agricultural endeavours as they rely on Yahweh to provide their daily needs. It is only when they enter into the Promised Land that active agriculture is reengaged. Thus, Israel is symbolically represented as entering the land on the eighth day of the week, where they take on the creative actions of subduing and ruling. But Israel's time before then is framed in the betwixt and between space of the liminal wilderness, a focusing sabbath-space to engage with Yahweh.

[255] Time is deferred in Gen 2:1-4 as there is no mention of evening or morning.
[256] Furthermore, in line with this being a *sabbath* experience, I would also suggest that this wilderness *sabbath* time sets a pattern of significance. As the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee year will command a 'wilderness-like' experience, where the land will lie fallow and the slaves set free.

### 3.3.5 Summary: Exodus 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18

In summary, this section has examined Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18 in reference to specific geographical markers and broader geographical themes. The text clearly separates the Sinai narrative from the exodus deliverance by pausing Israel's travels at 'the mountain' in the Wilderness of Sinai. In the geographical marker of the mountain, Israel's theophanic experience is connected with Moses' previous experience in Exod 3. Furthermore, the wilderness demarcates a special zone for the theophanic encounter that is separate from normal spaces. In the wilderness, the mountain stands central, powerfully representing the encounter of heaven and earth, and Yahweh with the people. The mountain also structures and focuses the significance of the theophany. Furthermore, the wilderness enhances the special space that is created in this encounter. This unique space is emphasised particularly through the themes of holiness and sabbath-space, where the role of space as transformative is imagined. Overall, the wilderness is ideal for the setting of Yahweh's pivotal theophanic encounter with Israel, as it enables liminal separation, holiness and imaginations to be engaged. It also begins to reflect the nature of God, which the rest of this thesis will continue to explore.

## 3.4 EXODUS 33:18-34:8: THE LANDSCAPE OF MOUNT SINAI

In our final wilderness theophanic passage, Exod 33:18-34:8, Moses requests to see the glory of Yahweh. In terms of the geographical setting of this encounter, key elelments are not defined explicitly. This is due to the passage's immediate context within the larger Sinai pericope, and thus, the essentials of the setting have been previously developed (as discussed in section #3.3). Even so, two unique geographical elements appear in the narrative. First, Moses goes to a 'place' near God and second,

he is instructed to ‘stand on the rock’. These aspects will be examined for their geographic-narrative significance in aiding the message of the theophanic encounter in the wilderness.

### 3.4.1 A ‘Place’ Near God

First, in Exod 33:21 Moses is instructed that there is a ‘place’ near God. The same term (מקום) is used in this passage as in Exod 3:5. As noted previously, מקום can be used to refer to a sanctuary or holy place.[257] Similarly, this is what is referenced here. While there is no specific mention of holiness in the passage itself, as this *place* is near God, it would be appropriate to infer that this place is holy and distinct,[258] especially as the barriers of the previous passage that separates the mountain also remain in effect (see Exod 34:2-3). Furthermore, for Stuart, this ‘place’ near God ‘could hardly designate any other site than Mount Sinai because Sinai was his temporary dwelling place throughout Exod 20:1-40:33’.[259] This is confirmed in chapter 34, as Mount Sinai is explicitly where Moses goes to encounter God. In fact, Moses is instructed to present himself ‘there, on top of the mountain’ (34:2), a clear echo of where Moses has previously ascended in 19:20 and 24:17-18.

What is significant in detailing the ‘place’ in this encounter is that in the narrative sequence, it appears that God has prioritised the mount of Sinai and separated himself from the camp of the Israelites at the base of the mountain and the tent of meeting that Moses has erected.[260] While God is observed to meet with Moses and others at this tent, the chosen setting for his theophanic proclamation is the ‘place’ near God. Both

[257] Meyers, *Exodus*, 53. Cf., Gen 28:11, 19.
[258] Noth states in an aside that perhaps a ‘holy place’ is meant by this reference. See Noth, *Exodus*, 257.
[259] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:709.
[260] See Exod 33:7-11.

the tent and camp is overlooked. Instead, God requests that Moses returns to Mount Sinai, as this has been designated as the 'place' near him. In effect, God prefers the place of previous encounters, as well the previously designated holy-space of Mount Sinai, the mountain of God.

#### *3.4.1.1 Unique Spaces*

Three unique spaces are created in the wider narrative account (Exod 32-34); (1) the idol worshipping camp of the Israelite nation, (2) the outside of the camp where Moses, Levites and the God-seekers are located; and finally, (3) Moses at the top of Mount Sinai. Overall, God is portrayed as favouring the paramount regions of Mount Sinai. These spaces will now be discussed in further detail.

First, the camp with Moses' absence on Mount Sinai is associated with idolatry, false worship (32:1-5), revelry (32:6) and running wild (32:25). It becomes a place and the people a nation, which God wanted to abandon (33:2-3) and destroy (32:10). Geographically, the camp of Israel after the sin of the Golden calf idolatry is 'deemed unworthy to have God's meeting place with them inside the camp'.[261] Hence, God's presence is mediated outside the camp, in the Tent of Meeting, and more fully at Mount Sinai.

Second, on Moses' return from Sinai, he is positioned spatially with other God-fearers outside the camp. In Exod 32:26 Moses cries out at the 'entrance of the camp' that whoever is of Yahweh is to come to him there. It is the Levites who respond and gather to the outside of the camp with Moses. In the same way, Moses pitches a tent

[261] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 502.

some distance away outside the camp (33:7), where he could still inquire of Yahweh.[262] This tent of meeting is viewed as a temporary place to inquire of God, and by pitching it outside the camp, 'Moses reminded all the people how relatively distant God had become at that point from his people.'[263] Even so, the tent of meeting is still in the sight of the camp and not completely withdrawn from the people, although they are on the outside.[264] The people of Israel could see Moses going to the tent and the pillar of cloud 'speaking'[265] to him there and likewise they could access the tent.[266] However, the pillar of cloud only descended and talked to Moses, Yahweh's chosen one, and not the people (Exod 33:9). Thus, this geographic location portrays that God would appear here, outside the camp. However, God's presence was 'distant and non-continuous (v. 10), a diminished presence'.[267]

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[262] Enns, *Exodus*, 579.

[263] Stuart continues to state, 'Presumably, to pitch the tent any closer to the camp would have been impossible, a violation of God's warning that he would not closely accompany his people on their journey … but this one [tent] always stood empty—just a tent to indicate that God still had a "place" somewhat distant from and not for the time being *among* his people' (Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:696 [emphasis original]).

[264] Thus, the people could not fail to see Moses speaking to Yahweh as he was not hidden among the clouds on top of Mount Sinai. 'Though the tent of meeting was far off from the camp, it was far less far off than the top of Mount Sinai; what used to happen out of their sight now happened in full view' (Ibid., 2:697).

[265] Literally, the Hebrew states that 'the pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the entrance of the Tent and speak with Moses' (33:9). As Alter comments though, 'It is of course God speaking from the pillar of cloud. The oddness of the formulation is dictated by the fact that it is a vividly faith representation of the people's visual perspective: as each man stands at the entrance of his tent looking after Moses, and he sees the pillar of cloud (verse 10), it seems to him as though the pillar of cloud were speaking with Moses' (Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 503).

[266] An Israelite inquiring of the Lord was an action of active faith, which identified them with Yahweh. 'An Israelite had to separate himself spatially from the other Israelites in the camp and openly walk the considerable distance to the tent of meeting' (Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:697).

[267] Ibid., 2:694. In regards to the placement of the tent within the Sinai/Horeb narrative, it seems like some form was in use prior to the formal taberbacle accounts. However, Baden argues that 'all of the texts that are dependent on the description of the Tent in vv. 7-11 the narratives take place in the wilderness between the mountain and the border of Canaan. Indeed, while the Israelites are still at the mountain there is no need for any man-made place for Moses to speak with Yahweh; as the narrative demonstrates repeatedly, when Moses wants to speak with Yahweh, or vice versa, Yahweh speaks directly to Moses from the mountain' (Joel S. Baden, "On Exodus 33,1-11," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 124, no. 3 [2012]: 337). As such, Baden suggests that there should be a shift in the versification of vv. 6 and 7, where the 'last two words of v. 6 should actually be read as the first two words of v. 7: "After Mount Horeb, Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp"' (Ibid., 338).

Third, Mount Sinai in this narrative sequence is substantially portrayed as the location of God. It remains the mountain of God. Mount Sinai is the place that is untouchable by all except for Moses. It is the holy place that is separate from the camp of Israel; their everydayness, idolatry and revelry, and protected by its isolation and remoteness. It is the chosen place near God, where God dwells.

In summary, this narrative section geographically highlights Moses once again encountering God 'outside'; outside of the normal and centralised worship practices, and in the wilderness away from the sights and sounds of civilisation. Furthermore, encountering God's glory is on a different sphere to inquiring of God, as Moses cannot choose where to encounter God's glory in this profound way by pitching a tent. Instead, God controls how, by what means and specifically, *where* he will reveal his glory and thus, himself.[268] As a consequence, Yahweh clearly prefers the heights of Mount Sinai in the wilderness. Therefore, it is to this hidden, rugged wilderness-mount 'place' that Moses is summoned to encounter Yahweh.

### 3.4.2 Rock and Cleft

Further, in the encounter in Exod 33:18-34:8, Moses is directed by Yahweh to stand upon 'the rock'. This is similar to Exod 3 where Moses was asked to 'ground' himself by removing his shoes in the dusty wilderness for the theophanic encounter.[269] In Exod 33:18-34:8 though, not only is Moses asked to stand upon the rock, but he will also be covered by the rock as he is put into a cleft or crevice of the rock and shielded

[268] An additional comment is that at the end of the book of Exodus, the spatial setting of people and places will be inverted. As when the Israelites commence their journey from Sinai, the tabernacle and not Sinai, will become the place of God's dwelling. God's presence will be among them in the camp. The Levites will act as a buffer between the holy places and the rest of the camp. Whereas, the wilderness they are travelling through will be the abandoned, chaotic and distant place.
[269] A concept that will be engaged with in #6.2.2.2.

by God. The majority of commentaries do not consider why Moses is instructed to station himself on the rock for God to push him further into the rock cleft. In fact, there is a dearth of information considering the setting of this scene. Yet, in our wilderness-landscaped focused thesis, it is vital to examine this setting.

In considering Exod 33:18-34:8, the narrative portrays that Moses is to set or station himself on a rock (33:21). As already noted, the 'place' near God indicates that the reference is Mount Sinai. Further, the word for rock 'צור' affirms this conclusion. As the term צור is geographically linked with the harder rock found in Sinai or Moab.[270] The Hebrew sentence also uses the definite article, thus Stuart concludes that 'the rock' is a way of stating 'Mount Sinai'.[271] Specifically, 'The "rock" on which Moses stood waiting for God's glory to pass by, the "cleft" in that rock in which God put Moses, and that he personally put Moses in it all indicate the location as the top of Mount Sinai once again'.[272] The fulfilment of this is seen in chapter 34.

Yet, what could be the reason why the text does not state 'the Mount' or 'Mount Sinai', but instead refers to 'the rock'? I would argue that this occasion is to be contrasted with the glitzy, ornate and handcrafted golden calf revelry (in the previous chapter, Exod 32). Therefore, the text purposefully emphasises that the worship of Yahweh involves the earthy, real and untouched.[273] Gruenwald also suggests that Moses stood on a rock, because 'stones and rocks are almost universally identified

[270] This is distinct from the term used for the 'rock' (סלע) Moses strikes in Numbers 20, in the wilderness of Zin, which is chalky and softer in form. Whereas, צור as used in Exod 17 refers to 'impermeable granite' found in the Sinai/Horeb region, in which no one could aim to produce water through striking. (Beck, "Why Did Moses Strike Out?," 139–140).
[271] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:710.
[272] Ibid., 2:709.
[273] For example, in Exod 20:24-26 there are instructions to craft an altar to worship Yahweh with earth and undressed stones that continues this theme.

with cultic sites on which a great variety of rituals is enacted'.[274] Thus, for this theophanic appearing of God, the undergirding theme of worship is prominent, and a contrast between the worship of the golden calf and Yahweh is clearly reinforced. Furthermore, Moses is shown to be orientating his worship on something strong, permanent and that withholds shaking. This is not just for him alone, but an image of the entire nation of Israel who is likewise being drawn into worship of and founded on the stability and solidness of 'the rock' of Yahweh.

Further, a correlation with the tablets of stone on which Yahweh's Words were written on and 'the rock' where Moses is to be positioned may be referenced here. Whilst semantically the words have different forms,[275] the imagery is uncanny. In that Moses is taking the second set of tablet stones up the mountain to be rewritten by God, and he is to set himself upon the rock. Visually, Moses is standing on the rock, being put into the cleft of the rock, and then subsequently holding onto two carved stones. The solidness of the physical objects in this pericope uniquely builds upon each other, emphasising the foundational nature of this event. A further intersection can also be read with the originating narrative of Israel/Jacob of whom it has been said that stones are 'Jacob's personal motif'.[276] At this site, Israel will be inaugurated into a nation, in fulfilment of the Israel/Jacob history. Overall, this solid rock-stone-tablet imagery highlights that it is upon the presence and promises of God, the

[274] 'In some cases stones and rocks become the foundations of temples. In any event, rocks and outstandingly shaped stones are universally singled out as sacred sites in many parts of the world, including the Near East' (Ithamar Gruenwald, "God the 'Stone/Rock': Myth, Idolatry, and Cultic Fetishism in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 3 [July 1, 1996]: 435–436).
[275] That is *'eben* (אבן) and '*tsur'* (צור).
[276] For example, Jacob rests his head on a pillow-stone, he sets up stones as memorial markers, he rolls the stone from the well when he meets Rachel and Leah, and he sets another pile of stones to confirm the treaty he has made with Laban. These stones are thought to express the hardness of his life, the obstacles to the promise, but also the solidness and foundation on which Israel is ultimately formed. See, Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 149., and also J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 2nd ed., The Biblical Seminar (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

proclamation of his name, and the Ten Words, that the nation of Israel is founded. The rock and stone metaphors—imperishable, solid and concrete—integrates the significance of these words into Moses and Israel's formative and essential covenant relationship with Yahweh God.

### 3.4.3 Summary: Exodus 33:18-34:8

In summary, the geographical setting for Exod 33:18-34:8 is set out at the start of the larger Sinai pericope in Exod 19. Even so, the geographical markers of 'a place' near God and 'rock' clearly portray a distinct space is required for this theophanic appearance of Yahweh. Moreover, Yahweh shows a preference for this meeting place to be in the wilderness and further beyond the camp of Israel. Yahweh prefers the isolated, the margins and the untamed. The wilderness place and rock becomes the solid and stable place of encounter and worship, which directly contrasts the transient golden calf episode, yet links to the originating narrative of Jacob/Israel. Therein, the narrative clearly weaves many significant messages into the text regarding Yahweh's appearance through the geographical markers.

## 3.5 CONCLUSION: THE WILDERNESS GEOGRAPHY AND THEOPHANIES

In conclusion, in this chapter I have aimed to elevate and identify the geographical elements, especially those related to the wilderness setting, within the selected theophanic passages. As such, the explicit geographical markers such as אחר, Horeb, mountain of God, the Wilderness of Sinai, the place near God, and the rock were discussed. The broader geographical themes that were articulated within the text, including the theme of holiness to spatial relationships to sabbath-space, were

examined. Throughout these passages, the setting and landscape, specifically of the wilderness terrain, impacts the framing of the narrative, the message's development, as well as the characterisation of Yahweh. Overall, there are three key aspects I wish to highlight that appear consistently through all selected wilderness theophanic passages. These are (1) Separation, (2) Holiness, and (3) Creative and Transformative Space.

### 3.5.1 Wilderness: Cultivates Separation

First, in each of the theophanic accounts, the wilderness setting promotes the unusual separation that the characters undergo from their normal spatial and geographic spheres. This is not surprising, as the wilderness setting is defined as isolated, amidst its other definitions of barren, marginalised and arid. Yet, what is captured is that the movement into the wilderness landscape by the characters (whether or not intentionally to encounter God) positions them for a theophanic encounter. I would suggest that the separation from normal spheres of activity and connection, which the wilderness setting creates, invites the appearance of God who, is displayed beyond these norms in a unique manner.

This was most clearly seen in Moses' initial encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush. Moses is described as being out the back (אחר) of the wilderness. He has gone beyond the normal bounds of his shepherding route, deeper into the wilderness. He is clearly separate to the usual patterns of his job, family, residence, religious activities and other affiliations. He is meticulously portrayed as separate via the wilderness landscape. In this separation, Yahweh appears.

Furthermore, the text clearly articulates the progressive separation of Moses' life via geographical terrains. First, Moses' origins were connected to the waters of the Nile and the rule and civilisation of Egypt. Moses, in his middle age, is exiled to Midian where he dwells in the tent of Jethro for the intervening years. Finally, Moses is linked to the deep wilderness as the deliverer of the people of Israel, through his encounter at the burning bush and his subsequent leadership of Israel through their 40 years in the wilderness sojourn. What is significant is that the transformative encounters of Moses with Yahweh occurred in the separated space of the wilderness, and not in the marketplace of Egypt or the tents of Jethro. It is when Moses is alone and separate in the deep wilderness, that the theophanic encounter takes place.

In the second and third theophanic encounter, the people of Israel are encamped in the wilderness of Sinai in front of the mountain. They, like Moses, have been removed from their previous identity as slaves and their homes in the shadows of the Egyptian superpower. They were brought into the wilderness arena in a purposeful move of Yahweh before they were to enter the Promised Land. Thus, in the wilderness, Israel is completely separated from Egypt, their homes and their former identities, but they are still yet to reside in their future land, homes and fulfil their freed identity. They are 'temporarily outside any culture'.[277] It is in this separated state, and in the setting of the wilderness that creates liminality, that they profoundly encounter Yahweh.

[277] Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 67. Davis continues to state: 'They have left Egypt and not yet entered Canaan, where they will experience the blessings, temptations, and (as the Bible represents it) moral failures that landed life make possible. They have not yet established even the culture of the wilderness years. So, this is a decisive moment in the formation of the mind-set of the people Israel – a new mind-set, ideally one characterized by obedience to God's commandments, that will enable them to be free of "all the sickness of Egypt" (Exod 15:26)' (Ibid.).

Finally, in the fourth encounter, Moses is asked to separate himself from the people of Israel, to stand on the rock that is near God. Moses is clearly asked to separate himself from the idol-worshipping camp of Israel, and even the human-made tent of meeting outside the camp, to the heights of Sinai. It is again, in this separate and isolated state that Yahweh chooses to be revealed.

Savran has aptly captured the nature of theophanic appearances occurring when the characters are separate to their normal settings. He states:

> The focus on the solitary aspect of the theophany highlights the unusual nature of the divine-human encounters, suggesting that there is something about the appearance of the divine that is antithetical to human company. This is a highly private experience, even though it always has public ramifications. This solitude also increases the sense of mystery and sanctity surrounding the encounter. Insofar as it is a highly uncommon occurrence, the recipient of the experience must separate himself from his everyday reality as a precondition for the encounter.[278]

Herein the wilderness landscape, in its isolation and marginalisation, is the ideal setting for theophanic encounters. It is the ultimate unusual place where the extraordinary and profound may occur. It is a place where the human characters are alone and separate from the norms of family, culture, religion and politics. Therefore, due to its separation, the wilderness setting is ideal to accommodate the appearance of Yahweh.

### 3.5.2 Wilderness: Captures Holiness

Second, the wilderness geography setting uniquely harnesses and expresses the characteristics of holiness. This is not surprising in terms of the wilderness' isolation, and hence, the connection of holiness with separation. However, the wilderness is

[278] Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," 127.

typically associated with outlaws, outcasts, wild animals and the despised. The wilderness, therefore, is notably thought to be an unlawful and godless place. In this regards, to connect the wilderness to holiness might be thought contradictory. Yet, when Yahweh appears, the landscape reflects his holiness. In fact, the wilderness is ideal to encapsulate and be riskily transformed from chaotic to holy.

The wilderness and theme of holiness were clearly depicted in Exod 3, where Yahweh specifically instructs Moses to remove his shoes for he is standing on 'holy ground'. However, at this point in time, Moses was unaware of the holiness of the moment. Yahweh clearly informs Moses of the holiness and sacredness of the encounter and expects a response from Moses in relation to this. Moses removes his shoes, acknowledging the significance of the moment, along with the transformation of the wilderness ground and his relationship with Yahweh.

Likewise, in Exod 19-24, and continuing into Exod 33:18-34:8, Yahweh instructs Moses and the people to erect barriers to demarcate the holiness of the mountain where Yahweh will descend. The people purposefully consecrate themselves in preparation to meet Yahweh on this holy ground. Once again, there is an emphasis on holiness. Geographically, the ground of the wilderness mountain is designated holy and reflects the appearance of Yahweh's holiness.

Holiness, in its mystery, wonder, fearfulness and otherness is profoundly portrayed via a wilderness landscape. Not only does the marginal and isolated aspect of the wilderness allude to its separateness and mystery, but its arid and barren landscape depicts the threat and fear-inducing nature of holiness. Its overall wild-ness captures

the holy, in its demand for respect. The wilderness is untameable and undomesticated, and so too is Yahweh in his holiness. Also, the wilderness is a barren landscape that can be transformed to accommodate the situation; chaotic landscapes are transformed by Yahweh's word into grounds of holiness. Thus, I would argue that it is no accident that the wilderness theophanies make clear reference to Yahweh's holy nature, as the wilderness is the perfect backdrop to reflect the beautiful, threatening and awe-inspiring holiness of Yahweh.

### 3.5.3 Wilderness: A Creative & Transformative Space

Third, the wilderness space and geographical elements within the selected theophanic passages portrays a creative and transformative space. The wilderness is in many ways the bare backdrop upon which the divine words and actions of Yahweh can be cast, as there are no prescriptive norms or barriers. While Yahweh's characterisation will be examined in the rest of the thesis, glimpses of how the wilderness setting itself enables Yahweh's wildness to be reflected have been initially explored in this chapter.

The wilderness as a blank and therefore, creative space, is portrayed via its isolation, aridness and barrenness. These characteristics enable anything to occur, as there are no limitations or expectations within this space. Hence, the references to the setting being אחר, *horeb*, and sabbath-space also connects to the idea of being a blank canvas, upon which Yahweh can paint any message he likes. Typically, the message is one of encounter and transformation.

Thus, for example, the wilderness is drawn into relationship with God, alongside the people themselves, and all are invited to respond. The wilderness is portrayed as a

setting that is not fixed or static. Instead, it is agile, responsive and able to accommodate the unpredictable, especially the transformation that occurs when Yahweh comes.[279]

### 3.5.4 Conclusion: Wilderness: Its Landscape and Influence

Overall, the wilderness setting of Yahweh's theophanic encounters in Exodus is pivotal to what will occur in this space. As displayed within this chapter, the wilderness is a preferred place for Yahweh to be revealed. This is due to the geographical markers and themes clearly connecting with the message and purposes of Yahweh. Specifically, this was seen via the three main ideas that the wilderness (1) cultivates separation, (2) captures holiness and (3) is a creative and transformative space. These themes will continue to be explored throughout the rest of this thesis, which is still to review how Yahweh is revealed via signs, the words spoken and how Yahweh is experienced in the wilderness setting.

[279] More of this will be discussed in the following chapters of this thesis.

# CHAPTER 4: SIGNS OF YAHWEH IN THE WILDERNESS

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 3, the key geographic elements within the selected Exodus theophanic texts were examined, noting that the wilderness setting is ideal for Yahweh to be revealed due to its separation from other spaces, its ability to foster holiness and its nature as a creative and transformative space. In this chapter, I will build on these findings with a specific focus on the form and signs that Yahweh uses to appear in the wilderness setting.

The reason signs will be examined is, as Fretheim has noted, that 'it is often said that the word spoken is the focus of the theophany. But the fact that there is always some empirical reference to God's appearances, something concrete and tangible associated with them, has not been sufficiently appreciated'.[280] As such, this chapter aims to engage with the 'concrete and tangible' aspects of the appearance of God, recognising that these are key components of Yahweh's revelation that give 'greater intensity of presence, with greater directionality and potential effectiveness for the word spoken'.[281] Specifically, the chief aim is to discuss the key signs God uses as means of self-revelation, with particular attention to how they relate, if at all, to the wilderness setting in Exod 3:1-4:17, 19:1-20:21, 24:9-18, and 33:18-34:8. In subsequent chapters, the focus will turn to examining the words Yahweh speaks as well as Israel's experience of the theophanic appearance of God.

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[280] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 84.
[281] Ibid., 101.

## 4.2 EXODUS 3:1-4:17: SIGNS OF YAHWEH

In our first passage, Exod 3:1-4:17, the burning bush is an obvious symbol that is alight with multiple images and meaning. This image is an extraordinary sign of God's appearance, and is even more distinctive due to the backdrop of the wilderness. Hence, this section will engage with the various aspects of the burning bush sign through which God is revealed. This includes (1) the bush, (2) an unconsuming fire, (3) the bush aflame and finally, (4) the messenger in the midst.

### 4.2.1 The Bush

First, the image of the bush in Exod 3:1-4:17 is a unique and obvious sign of God, although elusive. It fleetingly appears in this account but has ignited the imaginations of readers throughout the centuries. In its own right, the biblical occurrence of סנה (*sĕneh)* is very rare, only appearing in the Exod 3 passage we are examining, (3:2, 3, 4) and in Deut 33:16 where the event is recollected.[282] The word סנה itself does not lend us many defining clues, beyond being the term usually for a bush, thorn or thorn bush.[283] Whilst there have been efforts to capture the specific nature of the bush in Moses' encounter,[284] nothing can be concluded due to the subtlety of the text. I would

[282] As Carroll notes, 'When the reception history of the burning bush story is taken into account, it is most curious that so little reference is ever made to the story in the Bible itself. My guess here is that the story in Exod 3 belongs to the latest block of narratives in the Bible and so was not known to the other writers of the Bible (or the story of Moses and the burning bush was of so little significance to other writers that they ignored it.) In a book as intertextual as the Bible the absence of allusions to the burning bush story is noteworthy; in my opinion the silence of the Bible about the story of Moses and the burning bush is at least as curious as the bush that burned without being consumed was an object of curiosity to Moses' (Carroll, "Strange Fire," 42).

[283] It also has links to the proper noun *Seneh*, meaning thorny or crag (see 1 Sam 14:4).

[284] For example, Sarna considers the bush to be *Rubus sanctus*, a prickly bush that grows besides wadis, has small rose-like flowers and fruit like raspberry that turn black when ripened (Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 39). It has also been proposed that the flame of fire was an illusion caused by the sun shining in a particular direction on the bush, a lightening strike or because of its bright blossoms. Others will

argue that the unique mention of the inconclusive סנה allows the bush-imagery to *burn* in reader's imaginations. As a result, the elusive mention of the bush is poetically vivid as it signals God's appearing. I will, therefore, discuss the potential significance of why God appears to Moses in the covering of such an elusive, yet vivid image: a burning bush.

#### *4.2.1.1 Sign of Life*

First, in the ANE climate, any vegetation is a sign of life. Fruitfulness is linked to the imagery of trees, bushes and vines. Thus, a green bush in the midst of an arid and dry wilderness terrain would draw attention.[285] In this manner, the imagery highlights an aspect of the nature of God. That is, God is one who can survive, be unconsumed by fire and even flourish in the harsh landscape of the wilderness. Where the people feel abandoned and neglected, or 'dry as the desert', he promotes life and hope; even in a dry and dusty place or *especially* in the wilderness arena. The bush, therefore, is a symbol of life as it provides shade, refuge, and even fruitfulness in the desert. In this way, it captures God by visually representing him as alive and thriving in the desert setting.

#### *4.2.1.2 Tree of Life*

Second, with the bush being a sign of life in the natural and physical realm, it has also been connected to the mythic 'tree of life' motif. The tree of life image in the Near East has been associated with sacred sites, theophanic appearances and even a

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comment that it was just the common shittim tree. See R. Laird Harris, "Sĕneh," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 629; Harold Norman Moldenke and Alma Lance Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1952), 23–24.

[285] Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," 362.

'primeval plant-totem' or 'tree god'.[286] Whatever the cultural and/or historical background, the tree image is multi-layered and closely linked to sacred events and encounters due to the tree being 'the epitome of the tenacity and regenerative power of nature in unprepossessing conditions'.[287] Within ancient Israel, the tree imagery is particularly linked to the tree of life image in the Garden of Eden, and becomes essential within temple symbolism. Wyatt would state in temple symbolism that the tree is important in 'representing the centre, the *axis mundi,* from which flows all vitality'.[288] Further, he continues that when applying this symbolism to the bush in Exod 3, the 'paramount image of the centre is used to transform the desert, *[and]* paramount image of the boundaries of the cosmos, into something which it is not perceived to be'.[289] Overall, it is the juxtaposition of God's presence in the bush against the desperate backdrop of the wilderness from which new horizons can be imagined. Where there is no hope and only despair, God is opening up a new way, which is centred on him and his holiness. God, who is viewed as the ultimate centre, will flow vitality into their barren situation to bring hope and transformation.[290]

#### *4.2.1.3 Scrub Nature*

Third, in tracing another angle of imaging the bush, Holmgren suggests that God chose to reveal himself purposefully in a thornbush due to its scrub nature, arguing it has a particular message for outcasts.

> Scrub people like scrub bushes count for little; few will care if they are abused or destroyed. But Yahweh cares. He discloses the depth of his caring in a symbolic action. By dwelling in and speaking from the lowly bush, Yahweh

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[286] Dorothy F. Zeligs, "Moses in Midian: The Burning Bush," *American Imago* 26, no. 4 (1969): 381.
[287] Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," 362–363.
[288] Ibid., 363.
[289] Ibid.
[290] As Wyatt specifically notes, the writer who was living in exile 'was concerned rather with the image of a sterile land, in which grew this miraculous plant, the locus of a hierophany' (Ibid., 362–363).

> proclaims his identification with a no-account people. Israelites were 'bush' people.[291]

Hence, not only does God identify as flourishing vegetation on the backdrop of the wilderness, but also uses the lowly and insignificant scrub as a foil to reveal his purposes.[292] In this way, God uses the unusual, uncomfortable and even abhorrent places and objects—bushes and wilderness—to highlight that places, people and history can be transformed because of his ability to create beauty and hope out of scarcity and dryness. Further, the bush was used for God to 'see how sensitive Moses is toward the insignificant and small things of life before he invests him with larger tasks'.[293] This, therefore, shakes one out of 'sanctuary piety'[294] and reliance on presupposed categories of how a deity should act. Yahweh, by his actions in the wilderness, therefore, shows a familiarity with the unusual, hidden and wild places, as well as displays empathy and intimacy with an overlooked, lowly people.[295]

#### *4.2.1.4 'The' Bush*

Fourth, Morgenstern presents that this is not just '*a*' bush but '*the*' bush. As every time 'bush' is mentioned in this passage the definite article is used.[296] Morgenstern states that this is important due to the Elohist author viewing Yahweh as one who,

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[291] Fredrick C. Holmgren, "Before the Temple, the Thornbush: An Exposition of Exodus 2:11-3:12," *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 3 (1983): 9.
[292] Levine, who summarises different Midrashim perspectives summarises that the bush has had multiple interpretations. These include: (1) the bush symbolises Israel, for just as a thorn bush is used as a protective hedge for a garden, Israel is the protective hedge for the world; (2) the bush could be used to symbolise Egypt, for when someone puts their hand into a thornbush they feel no pain, but when they try to withdraw it, they are stuck and feel great pain. So just as Israel entered freely into Egypt in Gen 47:6, they are now caught and cannot be easily removed. (Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," 24–26).
[293] Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 364.
[294] Holmgren, "Before the Temple, the Thornbush," 10.
[295] Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," 25.
[296] Julian Morgenstern, "The Elohist Narrative in Exodus 3:1-15," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 37, no. 4 (1921): 245–246.

> dwells in this bush permanently, and there he may always be found. Hence the article, הסנה, "the bush", the particular bush which is always distinguished by the presence of Yahwe *[sic]* in it; hence the otherwise altogether meaningless and incomprehensible designation of the mountain upon which the bush stands, and upon which, therefore, Yahwe *[sic]* dwells'.[297]

I appreciate Morgenstern's insight into the use of the definite article to indicate the uniqueness of this specific bush, but I disagree with his comment that this is where Yahweh dwelt permanently. The absence of Yahweh permanently dwelling in the bush within the rest of the biblical text highlights that Israel did not view it this way. Even so, the text shows that there is something significant about this bush, so that it is not just 'a bush'. Instead, like the ground around the bush that becomes holy, so a normal and everyday bush becomes 'the bush', because of the revelation of Yahweh who is in the midst of it.[298] It is because of God's presence that 'the' bush becomes a symbol of the transformation that is yet to come.

#### *4.2.1.5 Summary*

In summary, the bush is 'thematically integral to the narrative context' and not just an arbitrary attention-getting device.[299] In many ways it portrays the nature of God in a unique manner, as the bush image symbolises flourishing in the wilderness, connects to the wider biblical tree of life motif, highlights God's descent and connection with a scrub-like people and is a significant bush identified with Yahweh. Overall, it is an unusual multilayered sign that accompanies God's appearing.

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[297] Ibid., 246.
[298] Walter C. Kaiser notes, 'the definite article is probably being used here because Moses had referred to the bush so frequently in oral references before writing it down' In (In Frank Ely Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible: Genesis - Numbers*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990], 317).
[299] J. Gerald Janzen, "... And the Bush Was Not Consumed," *Encounter* 63, no. 1–2 (2002): 120, 124.

### 4.2.2 Unconsuming Fire

To continue the review of the bush in Exod 3:1-4:17 as a sign of God, there is more to the image, as the bush is aflame and yet unconsumed. As Exod 3:2 states, 'And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. And he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed'. The unconsuming fire is an unusual and crucial image associated with Yahweh in the wilderness account.

As previously observed, the term for bush remains elusive in the text, yet by contrast, the term fire is mentioned indirectly or directly five times in verses 2 and 3: 'flame of fire', 'burned in fire', 'not consumed', 'great sight' and 'bush is not burnt'.[300] The frequency is due to the recognition that fire is a symbol of God's presence, specifically his theophanic advent. In the Book of Exodus,[301] as well as within the canon at large,[302] fire is a frequent sign of God's presence. Indeed, fire as an image of God in this passage has been articulated as 'self-sufficient, self-perpetuating, and wholly unaffected by its environment, a symbol of the transcendent, awesome, and unapproachable Divine Presence'.[303] The symbol of fire captures these vast themes. In addition, fire is used as a symbol for God, 'because of its awesome devastating power and capriciousness, fire can make one shudder with fear and is a singularly suitable metaphor for denoting the irresistibility, sovereign power and holiness of God'.[304] Overall, the use of fire imagery to portray God is apt in capturing the complexity of

[300] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:31.
[301] See for example: 3:21; 19:18; 24:17.
[302] See for example: Gen 15:17; 1 Kings 18:24; Acts 2:3.
[303] Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 41.
[304] Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:338.

his nature, for fire is an image that is inviting and awe inspiring, but also fearsome, destructive and uncontrollable.[305]

Furthermore, the fire in Exod 3 is described as a fire that burns but does not consume. It is this peculiarity that captures Moses' attention, as the fire is not acting how fire should (see Exod 3:3). As Enns notes, 'Fire normally burns wood, but here God holds it in abeyance. …The God who is calling him [*Moses*] is the God over creation. The natural phenomena do his bidding; all are under his control'.[306] The normal patterns of nature and creation are altered here in the wilderness. This leads one to posit that there are different norms and rules in the wilderness. Just as the human social norms are 'held in abeyance' in the wilderness, in that brigands and criminals find reprieve in the wilderness, so also God acts according to different norms and rules in the wilderness. That is, Yahweh's wilderness norm is to speak to Egyptian servants like Hagar on the run, generate a non-burning bush in the middle of nowhere, enable manna to fall from heaven, or fire, lightning and trumpet sounds to invade Sinai. I suggest that God is revealed as unconfined or unlimited to what is humanly expected, and that the wilderness is the perfect backdrop to highlight that he is 'self-sufficient, self-perpetuating, and wholly unaffected'[307] by the environment. The text is asking the reader to rethink their perception of the nature and identity of God, through this unconsuming fire in the wilderness, just like Moses is being asked to do in this encounter with the bush and Yahweh.

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[305] Expressly, 'Human beings are naturally both awed by and afraid of fire' (Kathy Beach-Verhey, "Exodus 3:1-12," *Interpretation* 59, no. 2 [2005]: 181).
[306] Enns, *Exodus*, 97.
[307] Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 41.

Finally, in acknowledging the reversal of norms by the bush's non-consumption in the wilderness, it must be noted that supernatural signs are very prominent in the Book of Exodus. These signs not only occur in the wilderness but also in the city of Egypt. So the 'abeyance' of the norms is not limited to the wilderness. As the narrative continues in Exodus, rivers will turn to blood, frogs, flies and locusts will invade a nation, gnats will form from dust, firstborn children will die in one cataclysmic night, and a sea will part.[308] However, what I would argue is significant, is that the initial revelation of who God is and his associated signs occur to the Israelite community via Moses in the isolation of the wilderness, not the hubbub of Egypt. Further, it occurs in a concentrated and condensed way: one bush, one person. That is, the sign of the bush's mysterious qualities occurs in the wilderness setting and becomes a precursor of who Yahweh is and what is to come. As this thesis is exploring that there is something genuinely unique about these encounters with Yahweh occurring in the wilderness—in dryness, at Horeb, in isolation—it highlights Yahweh's exceptional nature and humanity's experience of the same.

### 4.2.3 Bush Aflame: A Sign of (Re)Creation

Third, in drawing out the connection between the bush and fire, it is worthwhile to briefly note the creational and tabernacle narrative links for what these might yield in our interpretation of Exod 3:1-4:17.

The creational link is found in relation to the tree of life motif.[309] Cole specifically indicates that 'there may be a deliberate reminiscence of the Genesis story, where the

[308] See Exod 7-14.
[309] See #4.2.1.2

angel beings that guard the tree of life have flaming swords (Gen 3:24)'.[310] Furthermore, it is suggested that there is another connection between Exod 3 and Gen 2-3, via Moses' action of seeing a 'great sight'; for in the Garden of Eden, Yahweh God made 'every tree that is pleasant to the *sight*' (Gen 2:9). The narrator sets up a clear verbal resonance through using the same word (מראה). Thus, Moses is potentially seeing in the burning bush a re-visioning of the *sight* of the original edenic trees. That is, he is seeing the sight of the flaming doorway to the tree of life.

Both of these connections are especially pertinent in understanding why the appearance may have occurred out in the wilderness, away from any garden-like imagery. The sight of the bush is possibly a turning point for re-entering into the garden relationship and away from the wilderness-chaotic-like slavery they are experiencing in Egypt. That is, through Israel's deliverance from Egypt, they are being led through the wilderness into a new special covenant relationship with God, to ultimately return to a 'broad and spacious land', specifically Canaan via the burning bush. In this way, the burning bush is significant as it represents the transition from wilderness to garden, slavery to freedom, chaos to (re)creation for the people of Israel.

In addition, many scholars have long noted the ANE links between gardens and the practices of building palaces or temples. Wyatt specifically envisions the bush and fire/light images to suggest that the burning bush portrays a torch image.[311] From this, he highlights that 'since the very notion of a theophany implies cultic ideas and the associations of the sanctuary, such a double image almost inescapably evokes the

[310] Cole, *Exodus*, 64.
[311] Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," 363.

cultic lampstands—the *mĕnôrot*—of the temple'.[312] Further, he comments that the temple lampstand 'represents a "perpetual theophany", and this surely is the meaning of the unconsumed bush in Exodus'.[313] I agree that the sign of the burning bush reverberates through the biblical text and promotes many allusions to Eden, the tree of life, lampstand and the sanctuary. Thus, against the backdrop of the wilderness, on the uncreated dry and dusty plains, the sign of the burning bush envisions a return to Eden and intimate life with God and is incorporated subtly into tabernacle imagery via the lampstand.

### 4.2.4 Messenger in the Midst

Finally, in addition to the signs of the bush and fire, a messenger of Yahweh appears to Moses in flames of fire from the midst of the bush. Notably, this is a visual marker that occurs to gain Moses' attention. This suggestion is supported by Brueggemann who comments, 'It is odd that the angel appears, but says nothing and carries no message. It is as though the visible presence in the narrative is designed only to get Moses' attention, which it does'.[314] Despite this observation of it just being a visible presence, the appearance of the messenger (that quickly becomes identified as God) and his appearance in the midst of the bush profits further examination.

First, the phrase 'out of the midst of the bush' appears twice in the narrative (Exod 3:2, 4). The specific mention of the angel/God's calling out as being located in the midst of the bush emphasises God's presence with ancient Israel. God has not

[312] Ibid.
[313] Ibid., 364.
[314] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," 711.

abandoned them, and dwells in the midst of them.[315] Furthermore, it is pertinent that it is the expansive midst of the bush that is connected to the appearing of Yahweh and not any other imagery or location. As Davies argues, 'The issue of non-location is a critical one';[316] for if God spoke in or through a precise location he would be able to be pinned down. But as he speaks 'from within' the bush, without a fixed location, he remains outside of creation and outside of our control (like a bush that burns without being consumed).[317] In this way, the *wildness* of the wilderness setting complements the non-location and focuses the attention on the voice 'from within'.

Similarly, the midst of the bush imagery also shows that God is not only with Moses and Israel, but he is also identifying with the multi-layered imagery of the bush. As previously observed, the bush represents fruitfulness in the wilderness, links to the tree of life motif and highlights God's descent to be with his people. In addition, it can handle being burnt, yet not consumed. In all of these varied ways, the character of God is being subtly revealed.

Second, the text indicates that the messenger appeared in a flame of fire, not in the form of a flame itself.[318] Hence, the messenger is not a messenger of fire, but is God himself. The representation of appearing in the flames of fire though is important, as according to Holmgren, 'the divine presence, in Israelite thought, is always a hidden

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[315] As Young states: 'He who had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was at this very moment, despite the lowly condition of the people, in their midst. Nor had He ever deserted them. God had taken up His abode in their midst and would never abandon them. Even when He must bring judgment, He is in their midst. They cannot find Him by turning to the gods of Egypt, but must look for His presence among themselves' (Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," 6).
[316] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 445.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 54.

presence'.[319] Thus, 'in fire' God is manifest by the smoke or in the brightness of the flames, yet also concealed. The hidden nature of God is something yet to be explored in this thesis but will be examined further in the Sinai theophany. Even so, this veiled appearing is arguably related to the nature of wilderness. God remains elusive and wild in this encounter, comfortable with a fiery appearance from an indefinable midst of a bush. God reveals himself but remains cloaked, he is engaging yet playfully untameable, secreted in the fire and the wilderness location.

Third, according to Dozeman, the appearance of the divine messenger 'functions in one of two ways, depending on the geographical setting'.[320] First, in the land of Canaan the messenger wages holy war for or against Israel. But second, and related to our purposes, in the wilderness setting the divine messenger graciously leads people. Thus, Dozeman concludes that the 'appearance of the Messenger of Yahweh to Moses is for the purpose of rescuing the Israelites'.[321] Hence, while divine messengers appear in different biblical accounts, the geographical setting participates in the interpretation and role of the messenger. This is especially relevant in light of this study, wherein the driving question is; 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' It appears that Dozeman would agree that he does so to show his graciousness.

In summary, the sign of the messenger in the midst portrays Yahweh as being with his people as indicated by his location 'in the midst' of the bush. Second, the messenger is hidden in flames of fire therein, portraying an elusive and playful, yet fiery, nature.

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[319] 'No one actually sees God, who is hidden in the thickest darkness (Ps 18:10-12; cf. Is 6) or, more often, in the blinding brightness of the fire' (Fredrick C. Holmgren, "Exodus 2:11-3:15," *Interpretation* 56, no. 1 [2002]: 76).
[320] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 125.
[321] Ibid.

Finally, Yahweh through his wilderness sign of a divine messenger, in the midst and in hidden flames, reveals his aim to graciously guide his people; not to embark on holy war against them.

### 4.2.5 Summary: Exodus 3:1-4:17

Overall, within Exod 3:1-4:17, the distinct signs of Yahweh are uniquely revealed against the wilderness setting of the theophanic encounter. This includes, first, the sign of the bush, within which coalesces various aspects of Yahweh's nature that includes fruitfulness in the wilderness, the tree of life motif, God's descent to be with and even like a scrub-people. Second, the sign of fire is a typical sign connected with Yahweh's theophanic coming. However, in this wilderness theophany, it is an unconsuming fire. The unconsuming fire clearly displays that Yahweh is unaffected by his environment. In fact, Yahweh is the one who affects and alters the environment, by holding the normal patterns—fire burning—in abeyance. Third, the sign of fire and the bush together portrays a return to Eden imagery and a foretaste of tabernacle imagery, through which the signs are layered to create a deeper and wider illustration of who Yahweh is. Finally, the sign of the messenger in the midst depicts God being with the people but yet beyond their circumstances. He is in the midst, yet without a fixed location. He remains hidden but is engaged.

In sum, these signs all display different facets of the nature of Yahweh and are uniquely suited to the wilderness setting of the theophanic encounter. In fact, the wilderness setting allows for these multi-layered images to be held in tension, due to its wild, marginal betwixt and between, and variable nature.

### 4.3 EXODUS 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18: SIGNS OF YAHWEH

In the second and third selected theophanic passages, Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, when ancient Israel comes to Mount Sinai, there are new signs and symbols to portray Yahweh in the narrative. Even so, there are also continuities with the elements that denote God's appearance at the burning bush. This section will continue to explore how Yahweh is revealed in these theophanic encounters, and as relevant, how the wilderness setting contributes to these signs. In the theophanies of Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, God is manifest through the signs of smoke (19:18), fire (19:18; 24:17), thunder and lightning (19:16; 20:18), trumpet or horn blast (19:13, 16, 19; 20:18), thick or utmost cloud (19:9, 16; 24:15-16, 18), thick darkness (20:21), pavement of sapphire (24:10) and heavens of clearness (24:10). It is these specific images that will be examined in this section.

First, as a caveat, it is recognised that many different traditions have been used in the formulation of the Sinai account. So much so that it is difficult to untwine the composite layers. Further, it is clear that recurrent OT theophanic imagery of thunderstorms, mountaintop appearances and fire are used in these passages.[322] This theophanic language and metaphor draws upon older ANE traditions, especially of the Canaanite and Babylonian myths. Whilst I acknowledge this vast tradition and its historical plus mythic influence, the narrative-geographical use of these terms as per the methodology of this thesis will be prioritised. All in all, the premise of this section

[322] See for example the works of Theodore Hiebert, "Theophany in the Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 1st ed., vol. 6, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1992), 505–511; Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); James Muilenburg, "The Speech of Theophany," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 28 (1964); Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995); Savran, *Encountering the Divine*; Gwyneth Windsor, "Theophany: Traditions of the Old Testament," *Theology* 75, no. 626 (1972): 411–416.

is that multivalent imagery has been used to 'describe the indescribable experience of the coming of Yahweh' and not one tradition or image.[323] Thus, it is the question of why the specific catalogue of imagery has been used in the wilderness setting that will be primarily evaluated.

### 4.3.1 Smoke and Fire

To commence, one of the key signs God uses in his appearance at Mount Sinai is smoke and fire. In fact, the mountain smoking from the presence of Yahweh descending in fire is 'the most frequent of all OT symbols of theophany'.[324] In turn, this section will examine the representation of Yahweh in the Sinai theophanic narrative, by first discussing the image of smoke and second reviewing the sign of fire.

#### *4.3.1.1 Smoke:*

In Exod 19:18 there are three separate references to smoke (root עשן) accompanying God's descent on Mount Sinai. Notably, the references are; 'Mount Sinai was in smoke', 'the smoke went up', 'like smoke from a furnace'. The sign of God appearing to the people in fire is that of the entire mountain in smoke. This is emphasised in the Hebrew text, which bluntly states, 'And Mount Sinai, smoke, all of it' (19:18). This suggests for Stuart 'that when the Israelites looked up the mountain, they saw virtually the whole engulfed in smoke rather than simply seeing smoke surrounding

[323] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:270.
[324] Ibid., 3:271.

the pinnacle'.[325] Thus, Yahweh's encounter was manifest by not just a wisp of smoky haze, but tremendous, rolling, and billowing smoke.

Further, the image of smoke is enhanced by the third description of smoke flowing from a kiln or furnace. This is a unique description that links back to ancient Israel's time in Egypt, where they would have fired many bricks in kilns as slaves (cf. Exod 1:14). The image captures something familiar to Israel, but is also transformed as Yahweh appears 'like' this image. Thus, the image is used to represent Yahweh as knowing their experience of slavery. Yet it also fosters a new layer to the representation of God, as God has reclaimed the image in relation to himself in the context of a freed wilderness people. The slavery connotations are removed, and the bricks they craft are now for themselves. Moreover, the kiln image also removes the image of an erupting volcano, as the kiln 'is likely to have been a closed kiln with a fire chamber beneath it and with a number of flues to conduct both heat and smoke'.[326] Thus, what is central is that smoke enveloped the mountain.

Why the imagery of smoke? The reason for the smoke, according to Durham, 'is to obscure what man *(sic)* cannot look upon and live'.[327] It recalls the image of incense, which would accompany royalty or a priest, creating a holy, mysterious and concealing atmosphere. It also echoes their experience of working in the kilns, as noted previously. Further, although the origin of the smoke image is said to be obscure, 'the portent is clear. Smoke (along with fire) proclaims the terror of

[325] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:430.
[326] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:271.
[327] Ibid.

Yahweh',[328] highlighting the fierceness of God's holiness against humanity's sin. Thus, smoke accompanies God's manifestation, announcing his presence in majesty and holiness, as well as shielding him from view. In this way, the image of smoke is highly mobile, awe inducing, and richly manifold. For example, as Allen states, the smoke of Yahweh's presence 'does not create panic among his own, but a mysterious wonderment, attraction, reverence, joy, and confidence';[329] although among his enemies the smoke of Yahweh represents his anger and causes terror and panic. All in all, the image of smoke fosters numerous meanings and reactions to Yahweh's appearing.

To return to the furnace simile, it has another significance due to its other biblical use that describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this account, dense smoke rose 'like smoke from a furnace' from the destroyed lands of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:28). Niehaus highlights that the parallel use of the key term in these passages 'is unmistakable and far from accidental'.[330] Thereby, this intertextual parallel draws our attention to God coming both in mercy and judgement. The law and commandments Yahweh is about to give at Mt Sinai are gracious and holy, yet also implies severe judgement if broken; just like Sodom and Gomorrah. The wildness of the wilderness background further juxtaposes the seriousness of this encounter with God; he is not a tame God, he can devastate like Sodom and Gomorrah. Hence, Yahweh is a God who comes in smoke, both peaceably and royally, but also with the gravity of threatening judgment.

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[328] Ronald B. Allen, "ʿāšan," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 705.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 195–196.

Furthermore, there is a key role that Mount Sinai has in connection to the image of smoke. Mount Sinai is notably the *place* 'on smoke', 'in smoke' and 'billowing forth smoke' (Exod 19:18). It is enveloped and encompassed by the smoke. This is further accented in Exod 20:18, where the people see the 'mountain smoking'. Mount Sinai was in smoke, all of it. It was not left out of God's appearance, rather, the mountain trembles, quakes and spills forth smoke, as Yahweh comes. Mount Sinai is emphasised as the *place* that is engulfed in smoke in the theophanic encounter. Hence, God uses *places* as well as objects and images, to portray his presence. Moreover, in this latter narration, the mountain smoking (20:18) echoes the "smoking firepot" imagery of Abraham's covenant encounter with God in Gen 15:17,[331] through which a connection between the covenant made between God and Abraham, and now God and Israel, is developed. Both occur 'in the context of a fiery, kratophanic (powerful theophanic) manifestation of God's presence'.[332] As such, a link is made between these covenant encounters and God's appearance. I will discuss this further in section #4.3.2 'thunder and lightning'.

*4.3.1.2 Fire:*

Second, Yahweh is portrayed via the image of fire. This is not a new image, as already discussed; the burning bush uses fire as the primary image to convey the appearance of God to Moses. In Exod 19-24, fire is a recurrent theme, with two key citations in 19:18 and 24:17.

[331] As Hamilton comments, this is due to similar phrasing, alongside Exod 20:18 mentioning 'lightning flashes' which likewise recalls the blazing torch in the covenant ceremony of Gen 15:17. See Hamilton, *Exodus*, 356.
[332] Ibid.

In Exod 19:18, as already shown, Mount Sinai was enveloped in smoke, all of it. The reason for this is explicitly stated, 'because Yahweh descended upon the mountain in fire'. Thus, the smoke is there because Yahweh is there, in fire. The upheaval is caused by the presence of Yahweh, for the Hebrew text literally translates: 'from a presence that came down upon it, Yahweh in the fire'. Durham consequently translates this verse as 'The whole of Mount Sinai was smoking from the Presence of Yahweh who came down upon it in fire'.[333] Durham does this to emphasise the link between 'presence' and 'Yahweh', which is clearly conveyed in the Hebrew.[334] Hence, all the dramatic and accompanying signs, including the fire, are to be read in light of the 'presence of Yahweh'.

It is Yahweh who is causing fire, smoke, thunder and trembling. But in all these signs, fire remains the one that is most tightly knitted to the presence of Yahweh himself. God descended to the top of the mountain 'in fire'. The correlation between this description and the flaming bush are pertinent. However, the main distinction is that God descended to the top of the mountain in fire (top-down),[335] whereas in Exod 3 God appeared in a flame of fire in the midst of the bush (bottom-up). Another distinction is that in Exod 3 there is no mention of smoke, yet smoke is abundant in

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[333] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:266.
[334] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:267.
[335] On a side note, some commentators have inferred that the Exod 19-24 theophanic appearance of God was like a volcano eruption, due to the elements of smoke, fire and quaking. For example Fretheim states, regarding 19:18 that 'it must have been something like a lightning storm or volcanic eruption' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 261). However, Stuart notes that this 'stems from a naturalistic view of the narrative, one that sees Israelites as recording what they saw out of misunderstanding. By this way of thinking, they simply were overawed by the sort of phenomena that one sees when looking at an actively erupting volcano (smoke, explosions, the red glow of molten rock spewing forth from the crater at the top) and interpreted such things as the manifestation of a god's glory' (Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:561, see fn. 324). Furthermore, it is clear that the text states that the fire descended (19:18). This is different to an eruption, where the fire would explode and ascend. Thus, it is concluded that this event is not to be viewed as a volcanic eruption, due to the fire moving in the opposite direction. (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:271). This is also consistent with how the smoke is represented, as previously noted. However, an event just as dramatic, terrifying and awe-inspiring as a volcanic eruption is being recounted, which cannot be described through natural means.

Exod 19 and connected to the fire imagery more prominently. The smoke reference is likely emphasised due to the representation of the pillar of fire and smoke/cloud that will remain with Israel following their departure from Sinai, as well as to describe the overwhelming and dramatic nature of this encounter. Despite the slightly different representations of fire in the theophanies, the key image of fire flickers strong and aptly represents the intricacies of Yahweh's nature.

Fire is not something that can be played with—it is fierce and deathly, yet warm and lifesaving. Equally, the presence of Yahweh is both wild and wonderful. As Ryken summarises, 'Fire both attracts and repels. We are drawn to its warmth and beauty, and at the same time we are kept away by the danger of its burning. So, too, we are attracted to the beauty of God's holiness but at the same time repelled by its power to destroy us'.[336] That the author/s chose an image that is multivalent is not surprising. Just like the smoke image, fire similarly encompasses the spectrum of many facets, for as fire warms, invites, provides defence and purifies, it equally consumes and destroys. All in all, the image of fire is profoundly integrated into the narrative to highlight the presence of Yahweh.

In the second reference to fire in the Sinai theophanic encounter, the author comments that 'the appearance of the glory of Yahweh was like a consuming fire on the top of the mount in the sight of the Israelites' (Exod 24:17). In this verse, which occurs after God's direct appearance to the elders on the mountain, there is a contrasting viewpoint. That is, a summary of God's glory rather than his direct presence is narrated through the eyes of the people of Israel who remain at the bottom of the

[336] Ryken, *Exodus*, 513.

mountain. In their separation, the people of Israel see the glory as a 'devouring fire'. As Alter highlights, 'There is more mystifying occlusion than revelation here: an enveloping cloud, flashes of fiery effulgence from within it. Even such distance glimpses of the deity must be qualified by simile—"like consuming fire"'.[337] That the fire imagery is reignited once again is significant, as it continues to tie these key theophanic texts together. Although what is different is that in this encounter the fire is consuming. This is unlike Exod 3, where the fire burnt but did not consume, or even Exod 19 where Yahweh just descended in fire. I would argue that the text has harnessed the people's geographical viewpoint poignantly in this encounter by describing the fire as 'consuming'. This adjective deliberately incorporates the people's fear and drawing back (Exod 20:19). As a result, due to their voluntary separation, the fire (and hence, Yahweh) is no longer a curiosity or inviting, but instead, becomes fearsome, consuming and threatening. The people's place in the wilderness influences their perspective of this fiery sign of God.

Overall, there are two distinct pictures of fire that emerge from Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18 wilderness encounters. The first, while fierce, is inviting, engaging and clearly linked to Yahweh. The second is associated with fear, and viewed as dangerous and devouring due to the consequence of seeing Yahweh's glory, and due to the people's voluntary separation.

*4.3.1.3 Summary*

To summarise, this section has briefly reviewed Yahweh's theophanic appearance at Mount Sinai via the signs of smoke and fire. Smoke surrounds and conceals

[337] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 458.

Yahweh's appearance: billowing, engulfing and encompassing the place and the mountain where he appears. On the one hand, the smoke image creates mystery, connects to royal and priestly images, yet also proclaims the fierceness of Yahweh in his holiness. Fire, on the other hand, is explicitly connected to revealing the presence of Yahweh. It displays the beauty, purity and wonder of Yahweh, yet also Yahweh's potential to destroy and consume (depending on your location). Overall, these signs aid us in experiencing the wild and astonishing nature of Yahweh in the Wilderness of Sinai.

### 4.3.2 Thunder and Lightning

A second group of signs of God's presence used at Sinai is thunder and lightning. In ancient Israelite literature, the thunderstorm is the primary natural form used for theophanic appearances. The imagery of storm clouds, thunder and lightning bolts convey the ancient theophanic picture of God riding the clouds in his divine chariot, voice roaring, with weapons at hand.[338] For people living in an agricultural society, a thunderstorm is an awesome spectacle, for 'the violent winds, lightning, hail, and driving rain were the greatest demonstration of the powers of nature regularly experienced'.[339] Thus, it is no surprise that in Exod 19:16-19 and 20:18, the phenomena of thunder and lightning is used to portray the astounding experience of Yahweh's appearance.

[338] Hiebert, "Theophany in the Old Testament," 508–509.
[339] Ibid., 509.

#### *4.3.2.1 Thunder:*

Thunder 'was believed by peoples of the ancient Near East to be a manifestation of God's voice, (Heb. קול), an aspect of divine self-revelation in storms'.[340] In Exod 19:16, God's appearance is characterised as 'thunders', from the term קלת, the plural of the word 'voice' (קול).[341] Hence, the image is that of the voice of Yahweh booming, voice upon voice, thunder upon thundering. It is not a quiet theophany or hushed event occurring in the back of the wilderness. God's appearance is accompanied by the loudest of noises and thunderings. I argue that the thunder image is used to announce the appearance of Yahweh, as per theophanic tradition. However, the thunder image would encourage the readers to hearken to the voice of Yahweh. This is due to the overlap in the terms of 'thunders' and 'voice'. However, Yahweh will soon 'voice' transformative and covenant community-building words, with the delivery of the words of the Law. In this way, the expected theophanic form is utilised—thunders, yet it is expanded to also incorporate Yahweh 'voicing' the Ten Words.[342]

In Exod 19:19, the voice of God once again resounds. In this occasion, Moses is speaking to God, and God answers him. Usually, translators render this by stating that God answered him in a 'voice' (KJV, NIV). But another translation could be that 'Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder'.[343] This is due to the context of the surrounding dramatic elements, as well as the people's ability to observe and overhear the conversation, as Moses is still standing with them.[344] Further, the thunder-voice

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[340] Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 1003.
[341] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 456.
[342] See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion.
[343] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:431.
[344] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 218.

reference links the fear that the people are surely feeling, hearing and seeing. However, as Hamilton argues, the singular קול is used in this case and strictly should be translated as 'voice'.[345] This is the preferred translation, due to the switch from the plural (19:16) to the singular (19:19) as well as the context of the conversation between Yahweh and Moses, rather than all Israel.[346] Additionally, Yahweh's voice will soon speak the words that will unite Israel to himself in covenant relationship. Thus, the transition from the plural to singular 'prepares for the Decalogue as divine speech,'[347] as well as connects God's message with his presence. Yet, whether by voice or thunder, noise accompanies this theophanic appearing of Yahweh in the wilderness.

#### *4.3.2.2 Lightnings:*

Second, the thunders are accompanied by lightnings[348] in Exod 19:16. Lightning symbolises 'the power of God to wage war, in which case lightning bolts are likened to God's arrows'.[349] This term for lightning (רקב) is used fourteen times within the Bible, Waltke argues that these fourteen occasions 'are theologically significant because in all of these instances lightning is associated with the LORD. This awe-inspiring phenomenon in the heavens reveals God's greatness and separation from mortal man and accompanies him in his theophanies'.[350] Thus, the narrator(s) has expressly employed a term to highlight the power and wonder of Yahweh. This is clearly what is being presented in the dramatic signs of the theophanic encounter.

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[345] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 297.
[346] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 449.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Plural form is used in the Hebrew text. Thus, it should be translated as 'thunders and lightnings'.
[349] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 456.
[350] Bruce K. Waltke, "bāraq," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 133.

However, the subsequent passage, Exod 20:18, uses a different word for lightning (although the same term for thunder is kept). In 20:18, the rare form לפיד is used.[351] This term is found in the Pentateuch only in Gen. 15:17, where it refers to the blazing 'torch' that represented God at the covenant ceremony between Abraham and God. Hence, 'in both passages *lappid* represents God's physical, though mediated, presence'.[352] Thus, for our purposes, not only is a theophanic term utilised in 20:18, but the text also links the encounter of the Sinai covenant with the Abrahamic covenant by the rare term לפיד. The smoke (as seen previously) and lightning images unmistakably connect directly to the imagery of Abraham's 'smoking firepot' and 'blazing torch' encounter. Therefore, the Sinai covenant is linked to the Abrahamic covenant. God is once again encountering his people, the Abrahamic-descendents, in a foundational covenant-making moment. The use of multivalent images expands the perception of Yahweh's appearance, causing it to be recognised as a momentous and extraordinary occasion. It is not just another thunderstorm.[353]

#### *4.3.2.3 Summary*

In summary, Yahweh appears in the signs of thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai. Thunder is associated with the voice of Yahweh. This sign foreshadows the words that Yahweh will voice in the wilderness space, thundering words that will seal the covenant relationship of Israel. The sign of lightening relates to Yahweh's greatness

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[351] Plural form is again used in the Hebrew text.
[352] Enns, *Exodus*, 425.
[353] On a related theme, in discussing the image of thunder and lightning together, as a combined thunderstorm image, it also 'characterize[s] the creative power of God to bring forth rain from heaven' (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 456). Thus, whilst a thunderstorm can be violent and powerful, it also has beneficent qualities of rain and nourishment. It is this multi-dimensional portrayal that 'reflects the dual character of the holy' (Hiebert, "Theophany in the Old Testament," 509). Yahweh is both one to be feared as well as one who is compassionate and gracious to Israel.

and wonder. Moreover, the lightening in Exod 20:18 is connected to the blazing torch in Gen 15:17 by means of the same rare term לפיד. In this way, not only does the voice of Yahweh sound in thunder to prepare the people to hear him speak pivotal words, but via the lightening image the people are connected back to the foundations of Israel's heritage in the Abrahamic covenant. These sounds and sights announce that this is a historic event, not a normal storm. Moreover, the barren and formative space of the wilderness captures the different layers that exist in the signs of Yahweh; as well as the progressive revelation regarding the nature of Yahweh.

### 4.3.3 Trumpet Blast

A third sign of God in the wilderness of Sinai is the sound of the trumpet and ram's horn. This sign adds another resonance to the sound of thunders and voice that accompanies the appearance of God. The sound of the trumpet and ram's horn occurs in Exod 19:13, 16, 19 and 20:18 and will now be discussed.

The role of the trumpet/horn is set up in Exod 19:13, where Yahweh announces that a trumpet (יובל) sound will be the sign of his coming to meet with the people. Once the trumpet has sounded, the prepared and consecrated people may ascend the mount beyond the prescribed boundaries and approach God.[354] This trumpet blast is not a short burst, but rather, a sound that is sustained, drawn out and prolonged.[355] So much so, that no one could miss it or be unaware of the imminence of the main event, the appearance of Yahweh.

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[354] Enns, *Exodus*, 392.
[355] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:258. Durham also notes that it was probably a 'horn whose tone was amplified by the attachment of a metal resonance-bell. The sound produced by this arrangement would probably have been *[a]* far more piercing and awesome signal than a musical tone' (Ibid., 3:265).

In Exod 19:16, 19 and 20:18, the trumpet sounds again, but this time it is from a ram's horn (שופר). The significance of this different Hebrew term is unclear, for the words appear to be 'interchangeable'[356] and Alter asserts that, there is no 'important difference in meaning'.[357] The only distinction that I see conveyed in the text is that the sounding of the יובל may warn of the imminent appearance of God, while the שופר blast occurs when God is already in attendance. Thus, perhaps the trumpet is utilised as an instrument of warning rather than of worship, and vice versa for the ram's horn. However, this is a tenuous conclusion, and the significance is that both sounds are associated with declaring Yahweh's presence, whether imminent or present.

Moreover, in Exod 19:16 and 20:18, the sounding of the ram's horn accompanies the storm images of thunders, lightnings and thick cloud. The sound of the ram's horn alongside the storm images assists the people to recognise that something unusual was occurring. This is not an ordinary thunderstorm; with the sounding of the ram's horn it is clear that 'Yahweh was present in the worship of Israel'.[358] In particular, this is because the sounding of a ram's horn is commonly used in 'cultic liturgies, especially associated with festival occasions. The horn announced the procession of the ark into the temple (2 Sam 6:15) and the enthronement of God in the temple (Ps 47:5)'.[359] Thus, the traditional theophanic storm images are combined with the cultic image of a ram's horn on this occasion in the wilderness. The thunderings, therefore, expand to reverberate with the earnest sound of worship. In addition, the horn blast could also

[356] Hermann J. Austel, "Šāpar," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 951.
[357] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 425–426.
[358] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:270.
[359] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 456.

indicate ‘the alarm for war’, although the current setting at Sinai precludes this context.[360]

Overall, there are many dimensions to this sign of God, which embrace festivity, worship, warning, warfare, and announcing the presence of royalty. Scholars have concluded that the many dimensions are predominantly due to a melding of different theophanic traditions and sources. While this may be the case, I would also argue that the signs of God in the wilderness cultivate images that are multivalent and not typical. Thereby the combination of the storm imagery alongside the ram’s horn should not surprise us, as the narrator is grappling to convey the appearance of Yahweh uniquely in the wilderness. The layering and enhancements to the images assist capturing the profound complexity of the occasion. Further, the wilderness is the natural geographic setting for the use of multifaceted imagery, as it is not restricted by expected norms or social conventions.

For example, the mystery continues in the wilderness setting in terms of the trumpet/horn sign of God, as ‘there is here no hint about who was sounding the ram’s horn … The horn was sounded by no one belonging to Israel, not even by Moses’.[361] Where does the trumpet/ram’s horn sound come from and who is blowing the instrument? The isolated, barren wilderness backdrop leaves no explanation for the noise, ancient Israel is out in the middle of nowhere, and yet a continuous blast is sounding. Alter posits that ‘since ram’s horns were used both in calls to arms and in coronation ceremonies, one may assume this blast is of celestial origin, probably blown by a member of God’s angelic entourage, to announce the awe-inspiring

[360] Kaiser Jnr, “Exodus,” 476.
[361] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:271.

descent of the King of all the earth to deliver the Ten Words to His people'.[362] However, there is no definitive answer provided in the text as to who is sounding the trumpet. Regardless, this element is awe-inspiring, and fosters a further layer to the extraordinariness of this event.

Furthermore, the adjectives used to describe the horn's blast suggest that the sound intensifies from 19:13 to 19:16 to 19:19. In 19:13, the trumpet was 'drawn out'. In 19:16, the ram's horn was 'exceedingly loud'. And finally, in 19:19, the ram's horn 'grew louder and louder' in addition to being 'exceedingly loud'. Through the narrative's intensification of sound and its reverberation joining the thunders in the wilderness context, the text creates a leitmotif of sounds.[363] The sound builds up to the climatic point of Moses speaking and God answering him. So much so, that this conversation and Yahweh speaking the Ten Words becomes the focal point of this entire passage. The sound intensification reinforces this.[364]

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[362] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 425–426.

[363] As Dozeman has observed, there is a leitmotif in these verses that conveys the significance of this specific theophanic passage. 'A leitmotif throughout this section [16-19] is the Hebrew qol, "thunder, sound, voice". The motif describes the sound of the horn (vv. 16a, 19a), the thunder on the mountain (v. 16a), and the voice of God (v. 19b)' (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 449).

[364] As an additional point, the conversation between Moses and God in 19:19 occurs in tandem with the intensifying ram's horn soundings. As Stuart points out, a better translation might be 'Then as the sound of the trumpet kept getting much louder, Moses was speaking and God was answering him' (Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:430–431). Or Bruckner, highlighting the use of the verb הלך (literally "was walking") would translate it as 'the trumpet began moving closer… and grew louder and louder', and thereby idiomatically concludes that 'God was walking down the mountain toward them' (Bruckner, *Exodus*, 176). However, overall, it is best to understand the participle הלך as expressing an 'idea of long *continuance*', for הלך is the predicate with the co-ordinate adjective חזק (Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 344 [emphasis original]).

Overall, there is a cacophony of sounds simultaneously resonating from undefined sources in this wilderness arena—thunders, horn and voices—highlighting the climatic point in the passage; Yahweh has arrived.[365]

#### *4.3.3.1 Summary*

In sum, the third sign of the trumpet blast and ram's horn adds another sound and meaning to the representation of Yahweh through signs in the wilderness. The noise is mystifying and inexplicable, in that no one is clearly identified as sounding the trumpet/horn. Even so, the sign announces the presence of Yahweh, with the associated themes of festivity, royalty and worship. Moreover, the sound grows louder and louder in the text, and in combination with the previous thunderings, points to the climax of the passage; the words that will be spoken by Yahweh to Moses/Israel. Yet again, the silent and isolated wilderness setting harnesses and reflects the multivalency of meanings and sounds distinctively in this theophany.

### 4.3.4 Thick Cloud

Fourth, throughout Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, God is described as appearing in and speaking from a cloud (ענן).[366] The image of clouds is used frequently in the Bible as a sign of God. Patterson summarises that cloud imagery is used to highlight the concepts of covering, height, refreshing rain and transitoriness.[367] Further, in specific reference to God, it conveys the image of God as a Divine Warrior, and it signals the

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[365] What is more, I would also suggest that the eerie unending sound similarly mirrors the burning but unconsuming fire of Exod 3:2, but in an aural manner, thereby weaving the significance of these two encounters together.
[366] See specifically Exod 19:9, 19:16, 20:21, 24:15-16, 24:18.
[367] Richard D. Patterson, "The Imagery of Clouds in the Scriptures," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165, no. 657 (2008): 13–27.

Presence of God. In these theophanic verses, what is particularly emphasised are the elements of covering, height and presence. This is due to, first, God not being seen directly but just heard. Second, the cloud is described as being high upon the mountain with God descending as with the clouds. And finally, the presence of God is heralded via the cloud imagery, as God wants to engage with Moses and his people in dialogue and relationship and to do so covers himself with clouds. This section will examine this sign of Yahweh in relation to the wilderness.

In Exod 19:9, God states that he will come to Moses[368] in a 'thick or thickness of cloud'. Alter observes that the Hebrew phrasing used here 'brackets together two words that mean the same thing…. the effect would seem to be a kind of epic intensification'.[369] This relies on the argument where ''*av* means "cloud" and is not the same as *'aveh*, "thick," as most translations have assumed'.[370] Dozeman, therefore, literally translates it as 'the cloud of the cloud'.[371] Alter prefers the translation 'utmost cloud'.[372] For our purposes, in terms of the narrative, there is indeed an 'epic intensification' being portrayed. Yahweh is coming to speak and authenticate Moses' role as leader, and this occurs from the uttermost region through a veil of clouds.

In Exod 19:16, it is a 'dense or heavy cloud' (כבד ענן) that accompanies the other dramatic signs of the presence of God; thunder, lightnings and sound of a ram horn. Unlike 19:9, the description of the cloud in 19:16 does not involve synonyms. The Hebrew word כבד means 'heavy', thus the preferred translation is 'heavy cloud' or

[368] 'The "you" in this verse is singular, but the event of the advent or coming of God in a dense, dark cloud is public. Ordinarily, God dwells with his people in a pillar of cloud and fire; but here it turns dense and pitch black' (Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 475).
[369] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 424.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 451.
[372] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 424.

'thick cloud'.[373] Again this image conveys the concepts of covering, height and presence in the theophany of God. What I also note is that this cloud-sign, unlike thunder and lightning or the loud horn blast in the same verse, assists to create a continuous physical presence for God.

Further, it should be read that God manifested himself by the cloud, not that a cloud 'hid' him.[374] That is, this visual symbol of God, alongside the similar smoke and fire images, creates a sign for God's presence that is tangible and material. These phenomena function 'to reveal rather than conceal God'.[375] However, it is paradoxical that a water-cloud image, which is vaporous and transitory by nature, is used in the dry-wilderness. Yet, the narrator overcomes this by describing the cloud as heavy or dense (כבד). In this manner, the 'dense cloud' or 'utmost cloud' sign of God is extended and separated from the normal image of a misty or vaporous cloud.

Moreover, while a cloud is something that can be seen, it cannot be held onto, grasped or coerced by humans, no matter how dense or heavy. Even so, it does create a clear manifestation as well as barrier, albeit visual not physical, to God. As such, one knows that Yahweh is there, and the dense cloud assists to illustrate God's presence as holy, all enveloping, yet uncontrollable.[376] Further, as one can 'see' him in part, a

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[373] It is interesting that the 'dense or heavy' (כבד) is from the same root that translates as 'glory' (כבוד). This connection provides another layer to convey the weighty, heavy as well as the honorable presence of God. See John N. Oswalt, "Kābēd," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 426–427.
[374] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:429.
[375] Fretheim continues that the meteorological phenomena 'would also serve to place God's appearance to Israel within the context of God's pervasive presence within the structures of creation' (Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 89).
[376] Fretheim equally argues, 'Nevertheless, while the primary function of the empirical phenomena may be said to reveal and not to conceal God, they also suggest that about God's presence which cannot be controlled or contained. God's coming is not something which can be grasped in its fullness, either by mind or the eye' (Ibid., 90).

barrier is depicted that should not 'be violated in a careless or callous manner'.[377] Even so, this barrier is crossed, when Moses is invited by Yahweh to ascend the mountaintop, and enters into the midst of the cloud to meet with God (24:18). Overall, the unusual thick cloud becomes one more symbol, in the multiplicity of symbols, which attunes us to the ethereal, presence and wonder of God.[378]

In Exod 24:15-16, 18; the cloud is linked heavily to the place of Mount Sinai.[379] The mountain demarcated as the mountain of God is once again included in the theophanic appearance. Further, as Enns notes:

> The significance of the cloud in chapter 24 is not simply another indication of God's presence with Moses, although it is certainly that as well. It is rather another element in the narrative that sets the stage for what it to come. As we have noted before (ch. 19), there is a clear connection between Mount Sinai and the tabernacle. Both are where God's glory resides in the form of a cloud. According to 24:16, the glory of the Yahweh "settles" on the mountain. The Hebrew verb *šakan*, which is the verbal form of the noun *miškan*, which means "tabernacle"… The cloud's settling on the mountain thus anticipates the settling of the cloud over the tabernacle.[380]

Overall, the cloud motif ties together the theme of the presence of God that accompanies Israel on their travels, plus the worship of God in the tabernacle throughout the Book of Exodus. As such, what is occurring here at Sinai is not happenstance. God's appearance in thick cloud or being covered in cloud is purposeful, as it connects to the image of the pillar of cloud[381] that guided Israel

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[377] Patterson, "The Imagery of Clouds," 25.
[378] For example, beyond what I have just described, the thick cloud image also appeals to the prospect of refreshing rainfall that a cloud in the desert brings. God's presence, whilst mysterious and elusive, present but impenetrable, also alleviates dryness and barrenness. Therefore, it could be stated that he is approaching and revitalising his people.
[379] As 'a cloud covered the mount' (15), 'the glory of Yahweh abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it' (16). Further, from this position of being on Mount Sinai Yahweh, 'called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud' (16), and 'Moses went into the midst of the cloud' (18).
[380] Enns, *Exodus*, 493 (emphasis original).
[381] Specifically, the word '"Cloud" is the only translation of *ʿānān*. It occurs about eighty times in the OT, and three-quarters of those refer to the pillar of "cloud"' (R. Laird Harris, "ʿānān," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1999], 684).

through the wilderness whose function was to depict the tangible presence of the Lord, as well as the cloud that will dwell over the tabernacle. In this moment, the cloud is a multifaceted image that appears and reappears in the Book of Exodus to highlight the nearness of God—through Israel's travels in the wilderness, at Mount Sinai, and in the tabernacle—Yahweh is with them. What is noteworthy is that the first appearances are within the wilderness setting; this is the central catalyst from which the signs extend out.

Finally, there is one other reference to be considered in this section regarding clouds. That of Exod 20:21, where Moses approaches the 'thick darkness' or 'dark cloud' where God was. In this verse, a different term is used ערפל, to describe the cloud. Again, the term is clearly used to visually represent God, specifically the veiled glory of Yahweh. 'The same term is used of God's enveloped glory and his awesome judgments, the term is paradoxical: it bespeaks terror, wonder, fear, majesty, awe, and reverence'.[382] As such, this new term emphasises that Moses is experiencing God in a unique and comprehensive way.

Moreover, in regards to this 'dark cloud', Moses is the one who draws near rather than God descending. At this point in the narrative, the people have chosen to remain far-off. Hence, maybe this is why the narrator/s has used different terms, as they highlight the viewpoint of the people who are remaining at a distance due to fear.[383] Thus, the cloud is perceived as dark, impenetrable and fearsome. Alternatively, as the smoke, fire and cloud (ענן) have all intermingled at the top of Mount Sinai with the

[382] Ronald B. Allen, "ʿārap," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 698.
[383] See also #4.3.1.2, which discusses the people seeing the consuming fire of God.

descent of Yahweh, a new term 'thick darkness' (ערפל) is possibly used to capture the ultimate phenomena into which Moses is ascending. Whatever the reason, once again, we see that this brings another dimension to the sign of God that highlights the mystery of God[384] as well as his overwhelming wonder as he appears in the wilderness.

#### *4.3.4.1 Summary*

In summary, the thick cloud as a sign for Yahweh in the wilderness encompasses the aspects of covering, height and presence. It creates a visual sign of Yahweh's presence that is concrete and tangible. Therefore, Yahweh's descent to the mountain and nearness to Israel, as well as constructing a barrier to directly seeing him is revealed. The cloud motif further connects God's presence with Israel in their travels and worship in the tabernacle, for Yahweh is with Israel. Moreover, Moses ascends into the thick darkness to meet with God, indicating a new intimacy and mystery in their relationship. The wilderness setting, once again, can uniquely capture all these profound meanings.

### 4.3.5 Summary: Exodus 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18

Overall, the signs that Yahweh uses to revealed himself in the wilderness of Mount Sinai are those that are typically associated with OT theophanies, such as fire, storm and cultic imagery. However, as discussed, these signs are not used in their usual manner. Instead, through intensification, intertextual echoes, and in cooperation or even competition together, they dramatically emphasise Yahweh's theophanic

[384] 'The dark cloud was a sign of his mystery, showing that there are aspects of his being that we cannot penetrate' (Ryken, *Exodus*, 513).

appearance at Sinai. Moreover, the multivalency of signs underscores the Sinai theophany as a climatic point in Israel's history. I suggest in the wilderness, the signs are wilder; Yahweh is dramatically present. The senses of the people cannot help but be overwhelmed physically, via sight, sound, touch and smell. No one can escape the revelation of Yahweh against the barren backdrop of the wilderness. Fire and smoke, thunder and lighting, trumpet blasts and thick clouds culminate to announce that Yahweh is here and about to speak. Yahweh is promoted as formidable yet beautiful, uncontrollable and authoritative, concealed although revealed via these differing signs. The wilderness, yet again in its complexity of landscape and setting, captures the intricacies of these signs of Yahweh and provides insight into his nature adroitly. The many-varied signs can all be accommodated here in the Sinai wilderness, alongside the wild Yahweh God.

### 4.3.6 Exodus 24:9-18

As we continue to examine the signs of God within the Sinai theophany, this section will direct attention to the signs of Yahweh in Exod 24:9-18 that were not seen within the Exod 19:1-20:21 passage. Expressly, the focus will be turned to Exod 24:10 where the seventy elders, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and Moses went up the mountain of God. Here they 'saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, and it was like the essence of heaven in clearness' (24:10). From the first reading of this verse, it is transparent that human language is insufficient to fully describe Yahweh as he appears to the elders; 'it is too much for words'.[385] As a result the narrator relies on 'the language of analogy and approximation'[386] and 'doubled

[385] Enns, *Exodus*, 491.
[386] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 442.

simile—"like a fashioning of … ", "like the very heavens … "' instead of using direct language and references.[387] This is not too surprising, as this chapter has already observed that Yahweh is 'clouded' in metaphor. The task though, is to consider the signs used to describe God, mindful of the location of Mount Sinai and the wilderness setting, and the setting and signs contributes to the wilderness representation of the God of Israel in this passage. Thus, this section will engage with the language of analogy to discuss the signs of (1) the feet of God and (2) the description of what is underneath God's feet, and additionally consider (3) the intertextual connections regarding the image of grounded feet.

#### *4.3.6.1 Feet of God*

First, God is portrayed as being seen, but the exact reference is made to the *feet* of God being seen. Generally, scholars have concluded that, 'Mere flesh and blood cannot long sustain the vision of God, and so the visual focus immediately slides down to the celestial brilliance beneath God's feet'.[388] Or 'the group was not given permission to lift their faces toward God and so could describe only what they actually did see, the "pavement" beneath him, before which they were prostrate in reverential awe'.[389] The typical view is that seeing God's feet was the only way the elders could cope with the encounter of Yahweh.

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[387] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 457.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:334. Please note that a major weakness with Durham's comments is that the text does state that the elders saw God twice.

It is more likely though, that the feet of God are mentioned as it portrays the elders viewing the God of Israel from below, through the pavement.[390] That is, they were looking up into the heavens or the place of God, instead of having their vision slide down back to the base of the mountain where they were located. As such, by looking upward to God who is situated on the mountaintop, the most prominent aspect they would see is his feet.

#### *4.3.6.2 Underneath God's Feet*

Second, what is under the feet of God is described through two different similes; (1) a pavement of sapphire stones and (2) clear like the heavens.

The first simile described what was under the feet of God, a pavement. The term pavement is translated as "paving stone", "slab", and 'can refer to almost any flat stone surface, including the most common referent, a brick'.[391] Thus, God is portrayed as standing upon a solid surface, above or near this wilderness mount. Yahweh is truly grounded, however not in the dust of the wilderness, which we will observe with Moses in Exod 3[392] and contrary to the trembling image of the Sinai Mountain itself (19:18). Yahweh is standing strong, grounded on pavement, with feet seemingly unshod.

This latter descriptive term of God standing on a 'brick' pavement draws out a unique word play. Indeed, it recalls the 'brick' reference in the early chapters of Exodus,

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[390] Bernard P. Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 25, no. 2 (2011): 162–163.
[391] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:556.
[392] See section #5.2.2.

where the Egyptians forced the Hebrews to make bricks.[393] Thus, in this theophanic appearance of God there is a reversal, in that the 'brick' of God is brilliant, luminescent and dazzling sapphire, whereas the 'brick' of the Egyptians is forced and manufactured with terror and hard labour. The clever 'grounding' of God on this brick-pavement also confirms the overall purpose of God in the Book of Exodus, to set the people free from slavery to be Yahweh's heavenly representatives on earth.

Furthermore, the description of the stone surface as sapphire blue in appearance raises different readings. First, 'many scholars think that the Hebrew *sapir* refers to lapis lazuli. If the Hebrew term is actually cognate with sapphire, the writer clearly has in mind a blue sapphire'.[394] The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* says that ספיר is 'lapis lazuli, not sapphire'.[395] Whatever the particular stone might be, what is known for sure, is that it is blue in colour.

As a result, the blue stone develops a connection to the blue of the skies and heavens. The indication that blue stones refer to the heavens and/or a sacred zone is strengthened further due to lapis lazuli stones being used in the ANE within temple construction.[396] For example, 'the highest part of Babylonian temples was paved with lapis lazuli and was thought of as the habitation of the gods'.[397] Thus, as Durham states, there seems to be a double reference in this image, for it calls 'up the deep dark

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[393] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 439. For me, the reference to making bricks recalls the smoke billowing 'like smoke from a furnace' in Exod 19:18. Thus, could the appearance of God in fire and smoke at this wilderness-mount incorporate the forging of sapphire-bricks, making this a complete transformation of their slave past? Robinson notes 'The Targum says that the brick pavement, made by Gabriel as a footstool under the divine throne, commemorated the servitude in Egypt, when the Israelites had to make bricks' (Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," 162).
[394] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 457.
[395] David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Samekh-Pe*, vol. 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2007), 181.
[396] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 567.
[397] Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," 162.

blue of an endless sky and the building materials of legendary divine dwelling-places'.[398] Furthermore, the reflective and beautiful quality of the lapis lazuli gem, most likely imagined here, would surely reveal God's appearance as well as conceal him in vivid and dazzling reflections of light.[399] Finally, the sapphire gem pavement also has 'a royal significance, a kind of red carpet, indicating the status of the one who has deigned to be so close'.[400] Overall, the narrator is trying to overlay the image of skies, light, reflection, royal presence and heavenly-sacred residence through Yahweh's appearance signalled via this blue stoned pavement. The contrast to the dry and dusty wilderness is acute.

The multi-layering of images—heavens, temples, skies, stones, bricks—continues in this theophanic narrative. In drawing this all together, it is implied that God has brought a glimpse of his residence—heaven—to rugged Mount Sinai and the elders to reverse their slavery mindset. Consequently, Yahweh stands grounded on his heavenly blue-gemmed pavement despite the mountain's shaking. The elders look up through the pavement of bricks, one that they did not laboriously make, into the wonder of the blue-reflective heaven, to see Yahweh's feet.

The second simile for what is under God's feet is that it was 'like the very heaven for clearness or purity'. In examining this phrase, the Hebrew כעצם (root: עצם, *ʿeṣem*) literally translates as 'like the bone, body, or essence'.[401] Hence, the KJV translates the verse 'as it were the body of heaven in his clearness'. Or Hamilton translates 'as pure

[398] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:344.
[399] Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," 163.
[400] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 259.
[401] James Swanson, "ʿeṣem," *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

as the heart of heaven'.[402] Therefore, something of the very essence or absolute identity[403] or backbone of heaven is being portrayed to the elders. Correspondingly, Dozeman comments that the depiction 'indicates that the veil between heaven and earth is momentarily lifted'.[404] There is an opening between the two spaces, earth and heaven, and despite it only being described through similes, the essence or backbone or body of heaven is glimpsed.

The adjective describing the heavens as 'clearness or purity' recalls physical, ritual and ethical purity. However, the root is also 'cognate with Ugaritic *ṭhr* (variant *zhr*), used of gems of lapis lazuli'.[405] According to Polak, the Ugaritic *ṭhr* can also denote 'radiant'. Thus, he argues that 'the shining floor is in the same semantic sphere as the fire of the theophany which they witnessed, but of solid stone and thus more stable and easier to look at than the divine fire'.[406] Hence, the pavement and heavens are envisioned to be pure, fiery and glowing in the luminescence of blue stones. Furthermore, Stuart concludes that this blue, luminescent platform and clear-like body of heavens, 'presumably gave the men on the mountain the impression that God was not actually standing on the mountain but was simple visible there in a personal sort of way'.[407] This aligns, in part, with Robinson's description that the elders were looking up to God through the pavement, into the heavens.

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[402] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 439.
[403] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 567.
[404] Ibid.
[405] Edwin Yamauchi, "Ṭāhēr," ed. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 343.
[406] Frank H. Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction, Reception, Interpretation*, ed. Marc Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 139.
[407] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:556.

Overall, in this biblical section the description of the appearance of God is limited; in fact, the text is reticent to describe Yahweh. Instead, the focus is on the *place* where God is. That is the place 'like' pavement and bricks, and the backbone of heaven. This is a place underneath God, although he is still connected to it, through his feet. Yahweh stands secure in this place. The image that is displayed is solid, firm and stable, yet luminescent, light-filled and glorious. It is once again a juxtaposition of images, yet I suspect that in portraying the God of Israel, no categorical vocabulary can be drawn on. Pure, clear, heavenly, slab of stone, sapphires; all are words that are interlinked in the description of God's self-revelation.

#### *4.3.6.3 Intertextual Interlude – Grounded Feet*

Finally, in the Exod 24:9-18 theophanic appearance of God, I also 'hear' an intertextual connection between God's feet and Moses' feet in Exod 3.[408] God's feet in Exod 24:9-18 appear to be unshod. Likewise, Moses, after removing his sandals in his encounter with Yahweh, was barefoot at the burning bush (Exod 3:5). Further, the radiant pavement where God stands recalls the depiction of radiant theophanic fire in the bush.[409] Thus, reading back into Exod 3, I suggest that God was requiring Moses to draw near and enter the holy space of the burning bush, similar to how God is represented here; feet unshod in the purity and holiness of the radiant heavens. The burning bush and its associated holy ground required an attitude of reverence and awe, but also of solid connection and groundedness to God's purposes. This occurred via Moses' unshod feet. Similarly, in Exod 24:9-18, the imagery of sparkling pure blue and heavens represents the vitalness of holiness, and God's connection to Israel

[408] Moses' feet will be examined in #5.2.2.
[409] Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 139.

is displayed via God's unshod feet. Grounded feet are uniting factors in these accounts.

In reading forward to the theophanic appearance in Exod 33:21, God asks Moses to come to the place near him and to stand on the rock. From this account, could we conclude that the solid rock that Moses is asked to stand upon, is once again recalling the pavement, stone slab, or brick, that was under God's feet here in Exod 24? Moreover, could it be that God moves Moses onto the pavement, like sapphires and heaven like purity, within the crevice of the rock, so that Moses could experience the 'cleft' between heaven and earth, itself? This is an intriguing option to explore, for a reading that links imaginative or pictorial resonances instead of verbal resonances in texts[410] could yield such new horizons of interpretation.[411] I suspect that there is more being alluded to here than first imagined, yet this is beyond the scope of the thesis.

#### *4.3.6.4 Summary Exodus 24:9-18*

This section has reviewed the signs of God within the Exod 24:9-18 theophanic encounter. Of all the encounters this thesis has examined, this theophany is the most direct appearing of Yahweh, as the elders see God, albeit his feet, without a mediating sign. Even so, the text remains elusive in describing Yahweh, as only the pavement

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[410] Gershon Hepner, "Verbal Resonance in the Bible and Intertextuality," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 96 (2001): 3–27. Specifically, 'Verbal resonances extend the context of a verse beyond its immediate context, enabling the reader of biblical narratives to find a peshat ['plain meaning'] that can only be spotted by taking cognisance of other contexts where similar language is used. Such linkages may transform the significance of texts' (4-5).

[411] While the findings in an intertextual reader-orientated approach that examines the 'shared language, shared content, and formal resemblances' of texts can be varied, the evaluation of the significance of these relationships is less defined and/or measurable making it more an art than science (Geoffrey D. Miller, "Intertextuality in Old Testament Research," *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 3 [2011]: 298). As Miller states: 'Like any work of art, beauty—or in this case—intertextuality—is very much in the eye of the beholder' (Ibid.). See also Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 35.

beneath the feet of Yahweh is described. Further, Yahweh's feet are standing on pavement of sapphire that is clear like heavens; images, which contrast drastically to the wilderness setting. As a result, the purity, light and majesty of Yahweh and heaven-coming-down is being emphasised here. In addition, it is significant that the text concentres on the place where God's feet are placed and not on the one who stands. As discussed, I posit that this is to connect the wider theophanic passages in Exodus together and highlight the importance of holy ground and the solid foundation upon which Israel is being formed here in the liminal wilderness.

### 4.4 EXODUS 33:18-34:8: SIGNS OF YAHWEH

In Exod 33:18-34:8, the final theophanic passage, that this thesis is examining, the overt and dramatic signs for God have disappeared. Whereas the previous theophanic passages included fire, smoke and great trembling, this passage is circumspect by comparison. Yet, God is still present and active, albeit revealed in different signs. Walsh and Dozeman have particularly observed this movement in the Book of Exodus. They observed that Yahweh typically acts via powerful interventionist displays in the earlier chapters that are based in Egypt (1-15), and this shifts in the latter half of the book, especially in the wilderness to the theme of divine presence within Israel's travels (16-40).[412] Therefore, in light of the shift of God's portrayal within the Book of Exodus, this section will examine the theophanic signs in Exod

[412] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 44–47; Carey Walsh, "Where Did God Go? Theophanic Shift in Exodus," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (2013): 115–123. Dozeman establishes that geography reinforces the portrayal of the Divine in the book of Exodus, observing that 'The theme of divine power is explored, for the most part, in the setting of the land of Egypt. The theme of divine presence is developed in the setting of the wilderness' (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 45). Walsh is right to point out, however, that this shift is not 'an attenuation of divine power, but the increased role of people in discerning divine presence' especially via the cult, and the pillar of cloud and fire (Walsh, "Where Did God Go?," 117). What I note though in Exod 33:18-34:8, is that the themes of power and presence are still central, as God draws near Moses with his presence, and the threat of death from his power hovers if God removes his hand too early (Enns, *Exodus*, 583).

33:18-34:8 in four sections: (1) intimate, evolving and anthropomorphic signs, (2) hand of God, (3) God passes by and (4) God's back, to discuss how these key ideas play out in relation to the wilderness setting.

### 4.4.1 Intimate, Evolving and Anthropomorphic Signs

First, as an overview, in Exod 33:18-34:8, God transpires as the central actor and the text portrays the signs of God via anthropomorphic description. God responds to Moses' request to see his glory; and thereafter, initiates the action in the account. God will pass his presence by Moses, put Moses into the cleft of the rock and shield him with his hand. Further, in the three consecutive speeches introduced with 'and Yahweh said' (33:19, 20, 21), God speaks with no response from Moses. In response to this activity by Yahweh, Alter comments that 'Moses, having asked to see God face to face, is in a daunting situation where it is God Who will do all the talking and explain the limits of the revelation'.[413] Yahweh is the central protagonist in this account and responsible for the awe-inducing theophanic experience that is portrayed in intimate and anthropomorphic ways.

Although Yahweh is the main actor in this episode, it cannot be ignored that Moses was the one who interceded and initiated this encounter in Exod 33. Dozeman observes that 'the prayer is persuasive. It influences the decision of God … the prayer is based upon the fact that Moses is known by God, and it is also motivated by Moses' quest for additional knowledge of God'.[414] Moses and God have a unique and intimate relationship and this encounter encapsulates how each influenced the other. As

[413] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 505.
[414] Dozeman continues, 'The power of the prayer to influence God is not in external rituals of sacrifice, but in the charisma of Moses that arises from his personal relationship with God, as one who speaks to God face-to-face' (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 727).

Yahweh set up the burning bush to which Moses responded with curiosity, likewise, Yahweh cannot turn aside from Moses' curiosity; and request in this encounter. As such, maybe this is why God reveals himself more directly and anthropomorphically in this encounter than he has previously. Yet, even in this close relationship, it is always clear that Yahweh remains in control of where, how far and when the encounter occurs.

Moreover, in the wilderness encounters, Yahweh is not confined to portraying himself in a static manner. As this chapter has explored, each theophany yields different signs in how Yahweh is represented. This latter Exodus encounter, similarly, does not rely on the previous signs to portray Yahweh. Instead, the revelation continues to be unravelled. In Exod 33:18-34:8, Yahweh diverts to the most personal and relatable signs yet; those that are anthropomorphic. I would argue that the wilderness setting allows for this change, development and even variation in the appearing of Yahweh, due to its diverse and changeable nature, hence, why Yahweh utilises the wilderness setting to manifest in different manners. I will now turn to discuss the three anthropomorphic signs that Yahweh uses to manifest himself in this requested encounter with Moses; hand, passing by and back.

### 4.4.2 Hand of God

The first anthropomorphic sign is that of God shielding Moses with his hand (33:23). The Hebrew here is not the usual word for hand יד, but כף. כף refers to the inside or palm of the hand, 'the part that holds objects'.[415] The term כף conjures a close and

[415] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 505.

intimate picture of protection.[416] Specifically, in terms of the syntax of this verse, 'the conjunction of the verb "shield" (or "screen") with *kaf* is unusual, and perhaps *kaf* is used here because it is the tender part of the hand. Another scholarly proposal is that *kaf* in this instance is an assimilative spelling of *kanaf*, "wing" (or "border", of a garment), a noun elsewhere idiomatically associated with shielding or protection'.[417] Overall, what is accented through this narration is the tenderness and compassionate care of Yahweh in contradistinction to the fierce elements and potential life-threatening power of the encounter. God is taking special care of Moses, to grant his desire as much as possible.

### 4.4.3 God Passes By

The second anthropomorphic sign is God passing by (עבר) Moses (Exod 33:22). This is noteworthy, as God could have been glimpsed out of the corner of the eye or remained concealed in fire or another symbol, as per previous encounters, to Moses. But instead, God is portrayed as passing by Moses. 'The main idea of this verb is that of movement; as a rule it is the movement of one thing in relation to some other object which is stationary, moving, or motivating'.[418] Thus, with Yahweh passing by Moses, he is portrayed as active and in progress. Furthermore, Durham affirms, that 'An ancient tradition that Yahweh's Presence came near Moses in spatial terms is

[416] Stuart comments that, according to Moses 'the hand of God would seem a gentle, caring thing as opposed to, say, a lightning bolt, as the means of placing him in the rock's cleft. It was a way of saying to Moses not that God had a huge hand but that he would personally protect Moses from what otherwise would kill him' (Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:710).
[417] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 505.
[418] Gerard Van Groningen, "ʿābar," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 641.

clearly reflected here'.[419] Thus, in this sign, God draws near to Moses and passes by him in a concrete and substantial manner.

This is in contrast to the Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18 encounters, where Yahweh descends and resides on the Mount in a more stationary manner, with Israel camped below, and Moses is the one who moves back and forth. Whereas, in the Exod 33:18-34:8 encounter, Yahweh is elusive, coming and going where he desires. He cannot be pinned down, but is the 'passing' one. Yet in the same moment, he is proclaimed in both encounters as Yahweh – I AM – God present with Moses. Therefore, in the wilderness, Yahweh is present and chooses to reveal himself in new and varied ways. The wilderness landscape, with its unpredictable shifting sands and changeable nature, fittingly harnesses both Yahweh's 'passing' and residing imagery.

The full revelation of God is dangerous and unavailable. The only way to see and know Yahweh's fullness and glory is for him to pass by, be concealed through smoke and cloud, or revealed from the back. As Alter comments, 'God's intrinsic nature is inaccessible, and perhaps also intolerable, to the finite mind of man'.[420] Yahweh's full presence is always mediated. Humanity cannot dwell with or be exposed for too long to his full presence, as they will perish. Moreover, Yahweh is unlike any other gods, inasmuch as he chooses to be aniconic even though mediated. He does not remain stationary long enough to cast an image or get a proper fix on him, a direct contrast to

[419] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452–453. The citation continues: 'An ancient tradition that Yahweh's Presence came near Moses in spatial terms is clearly reflected here, not least in the additional report that Yahweh would protect Moses from any accidental (and fatal) sight of that which he could not endure to see by the placement over him of his palm until his Presence shall have passed by. These provisions transmit an air of frightening expectation' (Ibid., 453).
[420] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 506.

the golden calf idol that was created in the previous chapter (Exod 32). Even so, paradoxically, Yahweh is portrayed as one who draws near to pass by.

What expressly passes by? It is Yahweh, in his goodness (33:19) and glory (33:22). Distinctively, the text is describing the very essence of Yahweh—his bone, body and essence—passing by. Durham distinctively portrays that goodness 'refers not to an appearance of beauty but to a recital of character'.[421] This recital of Yahweh's goodness and character is expressly displayed as grace and mercy (33:19). Similarly, it is not Yahweh's 'power, his majesty, or his awesomeness that will pass by Moses, but his goodness'.[422] The revelation of Yahweh is nuanced, from the dramatic and interventionist actions that have been previously seen to the foundational substance and character of Yahweh's heart.[423] In this, there is a clear vulnerability. This correlates with the argument that 'the theophanies in human form bear witness to a God who has determined to be present in the world and to God's people in such an intensified way. This God has done in order to encounter the people and communicate with them in as personal a way as possible'.[424] God is interacting with Moses in a very personal manner in this encounter, so that he sees the very character of God, not just the actions of God. That is, Yahweh's inner workings and motivations are illustrated. Hence, God allows Moses to see more than he asks for. Moses asks to see the external wonder of Yahweh—his glory, yet Yahweh redirects Moses' attention to that which is beyond sight—his character and his voice.

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[421] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452.
[422] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 570.
[423] This is in line with Walsh and Dozeman's observations, see footnote 414.
[424] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 105.

This revelation of Yahweh's goodness is enlightening in contrast to the events of the golden calf (Exod 32). God could have decided to remain at a distance and just be known for his actions after that event, yet he chooses to engage with Moses in an anthropomorphic and intimate manner to reveal his character of goodness, grace and mercy. Further, Alter comments that 'God's goodness is not amenable to human prediction, calculation, or manipulation: it is God's untrammeled choice to bestow grace and compassion on whom He sees fit, as He has done with Moses'.[425] Hence, the insight into God's nature is not something that humans can conjure up, like the golden calf attempt. Instead, Yahweh's goodness and the revelation of his nature is as wild as the wilderness setting and mysterious in its passing by.

Moreover, in following the echoes of the verb 'passes', one cannot help but hear the verbal resonances with the other times עבר has been used in the Pentateuch to describe God's actions. For example, in the covenant ceremony with Abraham, God *passed* between the animal pieces to ratify the covenant (15:17). I suggest that through hearing this verbal resonance, God's action of passing by Moses in Exod 33:22 further (*re*)confirms his relationship with Moses and subsequently the people of Israel.[426] This is not just a passing by to appease Moses, but rather, it confirms and reaffirms all that God has been working towards throughout the generations. This is further accented with the other signs of God that were examined in the previous theophanic encounter—of smoke and lightning—that also look back to this foundational covenant ceremony. In these subtleties, the text clearly weaves these key

[425] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 505.
[426] Enns, similarly comes to this conclusion, acknowledging that God's action of having his goodness pass by implies the reestablishment of the covenant after the golden calf events. See Enns, *Exodus*, 582.

theophanic encounters all together, showing both the consistency of Yahweh and his nature.

Similarly, another occasion of verbal resonance using עבר, which is of interest to us, is in Exod 12. This is where God *passed* (עבר) through the land of Egypt in his culminating strike to release his people from Pharaoh's control. As he *passed* (עבר) through the land, all who had blood on the lintels of their doors he passed over (פסח) and defended from the destroyer (Exod 12:13; 23). The imagery of this event is profoundly related to Exod 33:18-34:8 in my mind. For in both examples, God is the one who is passing by, with the human characters stationing themselves in a secure place. In Egypt, it is within a house that has blood on the doorframes, whereas for Moses in the wilderness, it is on the rock near God at the mountaintop. In both occasions, it is God who protects the people and keeps them safe from death. Although, God causes the threat in the first place, either through his striking of the firstborns or seeing his unveiled glory. Once again, this is not a domesticated God that we are dealing with; he is dangerous and wild. In fact, as the doorframe acts as a cleft of protection for the people, I suggest that Moses being held within the tender palm of God and placed into the cleft of the rock correspondingly is the frame that shelters Moses from the fierceness of God.

In summary, the wilderness appropriately captures the image of God passing by Moses in this theophanic encounter. God is revealed in his goodness and glory, and in a manner that does not conform to Moses' expectations. Herein, the wilderness setting enables a profound and intimate, yet wild and even threatening encounter to occur.

Furthermore, through the action of passing, there are reconnections to the foundations of Israel's relationship with God.

### 4.4.4 God's Back

In God's passing by, Moses is allowed to see the third anthropomorphic sign of God's back. He says to Moses, 'I will remove My hand, and you will see my back, but my face will not be seen' (Exod 33:23). Moses will glimpse from his rocky outpost God revealing his back and not his face. It is the sign of God's back that I will address.

To begin, the focus in Exod 33:18-34:8 is on God's back and not his face. This is unusual, for by reading between the lines of the text and Yahweh's response, Moses and the audience equated seeing the glory of God with seeing the face of God.[427] Yet God acts independently of these expectations, and only discloses his back when the glory passes by. Therefore, Moses does see God, but it is not as predicted. God acts beyond the normal standards orchestrating the signs of his presence, and Moses (and even the reader) is clearly not in charge.

It is proposed that the action of only seeing God's back is to protect Moses because God knows that Moses cannot cope with an unmediated revelation. Furthermore, the action symbolises the changes that have occurred in the divine-human relationship since the golden calf incident, where face-to-face intimacy has been forfeited. Either way, God remains the central designer of the encounter opting to show only his back when he chooses to remove his hand. Overall though, he remains reluctant to reveal

[427] In comparison to Exod 3:1-4:17 where the motif of presence and face is central.

too much of himself to human sight.[428] Thus, 'the appearance of the divine glory will both conceal and reveal God to Moses, sparing his life yet invading his face with divine light'.[429] This is the paradox of encounter with Yahweh; he is present and protective, reveals and conceals, and is active, yet not as anticipated.

Specifically, what Moses will see or sense is 'the glory of God departing, moving away from him ("you will see my back") so that he would realize he had actually perceived something of God's true, visible manifestation of himself (even if not of his full essence)'.[430] This again ties in with the 'passing by' nature of Yahweh already discussed. God is inexplicable and mysterious in his revelation. He does reveal himself, not as expected. Instead, the focus is shifted to the proclamation of his name and his departing back, not his countenance.[431]

Fretheim argues that the purpose of Yahweh's back being revealed may 'relate to what one would see of a God leading a people on their journeys'.[432] Thus, this encounter is actually preparing the people and Moses once again for their journey to the Promised Land. If we follow this trajectory of thought, it is also indicative that this place is not the residence of Yahweh, anymore than Sinai is to be the residence of the people of Israel. There is an implicit urge to keep moving, keep passing by, and follow after Yahweh by keeping sight of him as he leads.

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[428] As I have noted before, Alter comments that 'God's intrinsic nature is inaccessible, and perhaps also intolerable, to the finite mind of man, but that something of His attributes…can be glimpsed by humankind' (Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 506).
[429] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 731.
[430] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:709.
[431] The puzzle remains though, that if Moses did see the face of God, would he be so enthralled and enraptured with this, that anything that Yahweh says would not be heard? It seems more likely that the text is accenting that one's words more than their appearance convey the heart and essence of a person. Thus, the very *who-ness* of Yahweh is in his name, not in his appearance (his *what-ness*). This will be reemphasised, as the message of Yahweh's words shall be discussed in more detail in chapter five.
[432] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 300.

Moreover, it could be proposed that God is playing coy or curtly withholding himself from Moses by hiding his face and only revealing his back.[433] As idiomatically, the Hebrew phrase 'to see only the back and not to see the face means, in effect, "to see nothing" or "to see virtually nothing"'.[434] Thus, is this an encounter at all? Does God reveal anything to Moses? I would argue that this is in fact the point, that *almost* nothing is seen. Only a fragment of God is glimpsed as his glory passes by in its departing nature. This is a reluctant and deferred theophany. Yahweh remains a conundrum, and the hint that he does provide is cloud-like, in its transient, unattainable and fleeting nature. I propose that in the aftermath of the golden calf incident, Yahweh is purposefully revealing himself as imperceptible, to intensify the contrast between himself and the other gods. Yahweh is unnoticeable and

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[433] In a brief side note, God will call *before Moses' face* the name of Yahweh, yet he will not reveal his own face to Moses. The repeated motif of face is powerful in this chapter. As while Yahweh hides his *face*, he still calls before Moses' *face* his name. So much so, that Moses' *face* is altered and shines radiantly (Exod 34:29). Subsequently, Moses is required to cover his *face* with a veil when he speaks to the people of Israel, but could be unveiled when in the presence of Yahweh. The contrast between back and face is an intriguing concurrence. Moreover, as an intertextual comment, whilst Exod 33:20, 23, clearly states that Yahweh 'hides' his face to protect Moses' life, there is remarkable literary resonance here with the previous passage Exod 3:1-4:17 where Moses hides his face. For example, in Exod 33:18-34:8, it is Yahweh who hides his *face* from Moses. Further, Yahweh shows his *back* parts and once again *proclaims his name* 'Yahweh' before Moses. This is similar to Moses in Exod 3:1-4:17, who was in the *back* parts of the wilderness, heard Yahweh *proclaim his name* before him, and in whose presence Moses hid his *face*. I would suggest that the connections maintained between these two passages highlight the relationship, call and purpose of God's deliverance. Durham and Enns also note the intertexual connections, especially focusing on the proclaimation of the name 'I AM' (see Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452; Enns, *Exodus*, 582). Further, the wilderness remains the common setting of both of these encounters. Unfailingly, we observe that in the wilderness location, God is revealed in unexpected and startling ways. In addition, Moses, hidden in the rock cleft by God's hand, is told that he will see God's *back* (Exod 33:23). What is unusual in the description of this encounter is that the term אחור is used from the same root as אהר used in Exod 3:1. This is unusual because nowhere else is this term used to describe 'the back of a person's anatomy'. Instead, usually '*gab* or *gaw* or *ʾōrep'* is used (see R. Laird Harris, "ʾāḥar," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1999], 33). Why this choice? This could be due to Fretheim's conclusion, already noted, that the *back* will be what people see when God leads the people on their travels (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 300). I grant that this is one reading, especially with Israel's departure about to occur from Mt Sinai. But could we propose that there is a deeper connection here, especially between Exod 3:1-4:17 and 33:18-34:8; that in the wilderness, out in the back or beyond, God reveals himself *backward* from all expectations and regulations, both to Moses alone and Moses along with the people of Israel?

[434] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:709.

uncontrollable, but he is still present and engaging with the people as his proclaimed name resounds (compared to the other gods who remain mute). In this, he is vastly different, for he is wildly vocal.[435]

### 4.4.5 Summary: Exodus 33:18-34:8

In summary, the signs of God in Exod 33:18-34:8 are portrayed with anthropomorphic language. This brings about a new development in the depiction of Yahweh that is raw, personable and wild. The backdrop of the wilderness exceptionally portrays this new development of Yahweh's character. Expressly, Yahweh does not respond as initially asked by Moses. Yet Yahweh interacts with Moses and provides him with a profound theophanic encounter. In terms of Yahweh's portrayal, this covers the vast positions of kindness and care, as demonstrated by protecting Moses by his hand; as well as threatening and elusive, as demonstrated by Yahweh's passing by and showing his back. Within the wilderness setting, the spectrum of signs by which Yahweh appears is effectively harnessed.

## 4.5 CONCLUSION: THE SIGNS OF YAHWEH AND THE WILDERNESS

To conclude, this chapter has investigated the signs that Yahweh used in the four selected Exodus wilderness appearances. Throughout the discussion, it was clear that Yahweh's appearance varies between the four passages and is not stock-standard or expected. Even so, there are two consistent points to summarise; Yahweh appears in signs that are (1) multi-layered as well as (2) revealing, yet concealing.

[435] As chapter 5 will explore.

### 4.5.1 Signs of Yahweh: Multi-Layered

In assessing the appearances of Yahweh in the wilderness, I propose that the images used to depict God are purposefully utilised for their complexity and variety. The signs are not one-dimensional but multi-layered. In fact, the images hold different perspectives on a spectrum with equal intricacy. Further, I offer that the wilderness setting in its geographical uniqueness and barrenness is the ideal setting to sustain these layered images in tension.

Overall, as this chapter has displayed, the images through which Yahweh is revealed in the wilderness are not the usual ancient theophanic descriptions (such as fire, storm or cultic imagery). Rather, the narrative has enhanced and expanded upon the typical imagery to produce a deeper picture of the profound encounters of Yahweh. More is occurring than purely natural phenomena or even traditional accountings, and the text adroitly captures this in depicting God.

The images employed are those that can handle the spectrum of representations; life plus death, mercy plus judgement, intimacy plus fear. For example, the burning bush is non-descript and scrub-like, yet it is also a symbol of life. The image of smoke has royal connections with incense and ceremony, but the smoke is also described as being ‘like a furnace’, which connotes an image of judgement. Thunder incorporates the voice of God, but also the war-fury cry of God. Lightning symbolises the weapons of Yahweh in battle, as well as the blazing torch of an ancient covenant ceremony with Abraham. The thunder and lightning storm is layered with the sound of the ram’s horn. The trembling of the mountain is not purely the earth quaking, but reverberates with the response of the people’s trembling. Even in anthropomorphic imagery, God

draws near but this is to pass by, or his feet are viewed through the clear heavens. Overall, trying to pin the images down to traditional, stock or even natural explanations (such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions) cannot hold the sophistication of the text. The images are multi-layered and purposeful in their paradox and complexity; to highlight that God cannot be 'confined to one single static image'.[436]

Moreover, it is no accident that these representations take place in the wilderness setting. The wilderness is a landscape of opposites, complexities and different norms. It is a place of wonder, beauty, refreshment and silence. But the wilderness is also a place that threatens survival, harbours fearsome creatures and people, and is brutally abandoned. Indeed, the wilderness setting is the primary geographical setting that could effectively display the signs, especially the dramatic signs of thunder, lightning, fire, smoke and trembling. In the expanse and isolation of the wilderness terrain, the effect generated is of a God who is wild, mysterious, dangerous and yet, also invitational. The wilderness, thus, is the perfect juxtaposition to foster an extraordinary event; Yahweh's appearing.

### 4.5.2 Signs of Yahweh: Tangible and Concealing

Second, the signs of Yahweh in the wilderness enable God to be revealed in a tangible manner. Nevertheless while they deftly reveal Yahweh's appearance they also conceal it. Thus, Yahweh is seen and experienced, however, the encounter is still mysterious and elusive. The wilderness setting, again, harnesses this contradiction fittingly.

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[436] George Savran, "Seeing Is Believing: On the Relative Priority of Visual and Verbal Perception of the Divine," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 17, no. 3 (2009): 321.

As seen throughout the chapter, God is revealed through 'created reality' images such as fire, smoke and burning bushes, and as the next chapter will examine, God speaks in conjunction with this.[437] The tangible signs enable God to be present with his people 'as concretely and personally and intensely as possible'.[438] The signs also assist to authenticate the origin of the words and message Yahweh speaks, showing that it is not manipulated or made up. The wilderness in its rawness and inescapability supports the tangible as well as dramatic signs of Yahweh. Nothing can be conjured, manipulated or hyped in this setting. The presence and identity of Yahweh is wholeheartedly on display and established through these steadfast theophanic signs.

Moreover, as the signs are tangible as well as multi-layered, there is the consequence of underlying precariousness. That is, the signs can be overwhelming in their power, reality and unusualness, yet equally viewed as underwhelming due to God using the created reality. That is, Yahweh, by utilising tangible signs, is exposed and as a result 'the human response can be derision or incredulity or mistrust' or alternatively trust and engagement.[439] But by appearing in the wilderness, Yahweh can be seen, vulnerable and engaged, but this setting also creates the freedom for a reaction of trust and/or mistrust to play out. In sum, the fierce wilderness enables Yahweh, as well as the people, to respond in a true manner that is authentic, not predictable or standardised. Therein, intimacy and relationship is cultivated, and is a potential reason for why Yahweh appears in the wilderness.

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[437] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, Interpreting Biblical Texts Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 146.
[438] Ibid.
[439] Ibid.

Furthermore, while risk and vulnerability is connected to the tangible signs of Yahweh's appearance, the signs are also concealing. God is in attendance, but how exactly this is, remains elusive. While I have aimed to unpack the essence of the signs, there is only so much that can be dissected. God is revealed in the signs, yet these signs also conceal. Expressly, Yahweh is present in and not hidden by, the image of fire, cloud and smoke. In this way, God proves to be tangible and containable, yet intangible and uncontainable. Savran notes that 'the double tradition of invisibility and palpable presence highlights the ambivalence of the biblical writers about representing God. The lack of consistency in biblical descriptions of theophany is in itself an indication of the limitations of language'.[440] One cannot get a clear fix or settle directly upon Yahweh. There are no boundaries. Instead, God freely comes and goes, just like the drift-land aspect to wilderness. The barrenness and changeable nature of the wilderness setting once again harnesses this complexity; that God is both tangible and present, though hidden and concealed.

### 4.5.3 Conclusion: The Wilderness and Signs of Yahweh

In conclusion, I suggest that part of the reason that Yahweh chooses to be revealed in wilderness is that this is a setting that supplements the complexity of multi-layered imagery as well as the mystery of being tangibly revealed and concealed. The wilderness setting is a place that Yahweh is free to appear in any manner so desired, and the landscape can support the complexity, paradox and mystery of however this might be.

[440] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 322.

# CHAPTER 5: YAHWEH'S WORDS IN THE WILDERNESS

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis, thus far, has considered the role of the wilderness landscape and the signs of God's appearance in the wilderness theophanic passages, and how this influences the characterisation of Yahweh. This chapter will build upon these discoveries, to examine the words that Yahweh speaks in the wilderness. The chapter specifically aims to review the message and words that Yahweh speaks, noticing the influence, if any, the setting of the wilderness has on the delivery or the words of the message. Again, it will undertake this appraisal of Yahweh's words spoken in the chosen wilderness theophanic passages of Exod 3:1-4:17, 19:1-20:21, 24:9-18 and 33:18-34:8.

Undergirding this chapter is the motivating question of whether there is any connection between the wilderness setting and Yahweh's speeches in this space. The text portrays Yahweh speaking profound and foundational words in the wilderness setting. Furthermore, the emphasis within the biblical text is on the spoken words of characters. Therefore, the questions that arise are; Does the silent rugged landscapes and uninhabited wilderness invite speech as well as listening? Does the awe-filled silence induce the spoken words of the divine? Does being on the margins, away from the hustle and conflicting noise of city life, allow for a visionary message to be cast? Does the wilderness provide an ideal environment, which is liminal and set apart, to create the space and moment for divine speech to occur? As from the outset, it

appears that Yahweh has chosen to speak in an isolated wild terrain, but what might be the reasons for this?

To explore these questions, I will investigate why Yahweh chooses to speak in the wilderness setting, first by considering the connection between the Hebrew terms מדבר and דבר. The rest of the chapter will examine the messages that Yahweh speaks in the chosen theophanic passages in four main sections (1) Exod 3:1-4:17, (2) Exod 19:1-20:21, (3) Exod 24:9-18, and (4) Exod 33:18-34:8.

### 5.1.1 מדבר and דבר

Prior to examining the spoken words in the wilderness within the Exodus texts, it is worthwhile to remark on the similarity between the Hebrew roots for 'wilderness' and 'word, speech, thing, matter'. Expressly, the terms מדבר and דבר. Both have the same root consonants דבר, and although it has been concluded that etymologically any link between מדבר and דבר is highly unlikely,[441] there does seem to be at least a distinctive, homophonic relationship between these two terms. I suggest this is important to consider in a thesis that centres on theophany and wilderness. Also, the terms are clearly significant because 'in any language the words that represent the basic verb for speaking and the noun for "word" cannot but be of supreme importance'.[442] Thus, some exploration of the term דבר and its derivatives and homophones, including מדבר, are fundamental.

[441] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 90.
[442] Earl S. Kalland, "Dābār," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 179.

In examining the scholarship, Wall observes that Rabbis in the past have noted the 'juxtaposition' of מדבר and דבר.[443] However, nothing conclusive regarding the connection of these terms has been articulated. Despite the hesitancy of scholarship to delineate a connection, I propose that there is a complicity in these terms. So much so, that the wilderness is an ideal place where words are welcome and invited, especially the weighty, profoundly creative and law-giving words of Yahweh.

In a survey reading of the biblical text it is evident that God speaks in a powerful manner in isolated, barren and marginalised places. For example, the chaos is ordered and form created in Gen 1 by God's speech. God affirms the futures of multiple biblical characters in places at the margins (for example Hagar, Moses, Elijah[444]). Yahweh speaks the Ten Words in the wilderness of Sinai. It cannot be mere coincidence that some of Israel's most transformative and foundational words, spoken to them by Yahweh God, were spoken within wilderness-like settings. A setting that utilises an expression that reflects in its pronunciation (מדבר), a clear association to the term for word and speech (דבר). This apparent preference of theophanic words spoken in the setting of the wilderness, therefore, highlights a relationship that goes beyond the etymology of the terms.

Therefore, I propose from this short overview that in the places of isolation, chaos and margins that are aptly displayed in the wilderness, the transformative and creative spoken word of God is particularly powerful in a manner unlike any other setting.[445] Whilst there might not be a linguistic correlation between דבר and מדבר there is a

[443] Wall, "Finding Identity in the Wilderness," 72.
[444] See Gen 16:7-16; 21:14-21; Exod 3:1-4:17; 1 Kgs 19:3-18.
[445] Wall, "Finding Identity in the Wilderness," 72.

sonic one, and a clear conceptual relationship in the imagery of the terms as well as practically in the behaviour of Yahweh. This will be displayed throughout the rest of the chapter where the theophanic words of Yahweh spoken in the wilderness are examined.

## 5.2 EXODUS 3:1-4:17: YAHWEH'S WORDS

In Exod 3:1-4:17, God's theophanic appearing centres around the words he speaks to Moses. In fact, God's words dominate the passage once Moses hides his face from the bush. To review then, how the wilderness setting impacts the words spoken, this section will examine two main topics within God's speeches. The first is the self-revelation of God's name and second, the promise of deliverance to a land flowing with milk and honey.

### 5.2.1 Yahweh Speaks: "I AM" Revelation of God

One of the key messages that God speaks in Exod 3:1-4:17 is the revelation of his name. This is absorbing, as the wilderness, an outer place would seem 'an incongruous place for the deity to reveal himself'.[446] Yet, it is clear that Yahweh sets up a unique encounter with Moses and unveils himself and his name in a new way in this location, whereupon it becomes 'a kind of semantic firebrand'.[447] Nevertheless, although an unveiling occurs, the revelation of Yahweh does remain mysterious—just like the imagery of the bush burning but not being burnt—for the explicit defining of the name of God is kept elusive. This has resulted in much commentary and speculation throughout the scholarship. In this section, these discussions will be

[446] Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," 362.
[447] Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14): God's 'Narrative Identity' Among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise," *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (2010): 333.

acknowledged, but the task will be to explore specifically the revelation of the name of Yahweh in the wilderness location. That is, what part does the geographical setting play in the words and revelation of 'I AM'?

Before examining the interaction between Yahweh's self-revelation and the setting of the wilderness, I will overview the passage. In Exod 3:4-10, Yahweh's first direct speech in the Book of Exodus is presented and it becomes programmatic for the events that will follow.[448] First, God identifies himself to Moses as the God of his father and Ancestors.[449] Second, he tells Moses that he has seen, heard and knows the situation of his people, and as such has commissioned Moses to bring them out of Egypt to a spacious land. Third, it is in response to Moses' objection, 'what is his name?' (3:13) that the revelation of God's nature is intensified: 'I AM who I AM. And he said, "This is what you shall say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (3:14). A revelation which although intensified is still not direct. Instead it occurs via three subsequent answers in 3:14a, 14b and 15. Blenkinsopp refers to these three answers as 'successive stages in the interpretative process', which provides great exegetical 'density' to this section.[450] It is this 'density' of revelation that I am aiming to discuss in reference to the revelation of God in the wilderness, observing that the

[448] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," 712.
[449] As noted by many scholars it is a collective singular used for 'God of your father'. Thus it should not be rendered 'God of your fathers'.
[450] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 149. Blenkinsopp also notes that we cannot confidently trace the sources in this passage, and in fact at times these have been applied mechanically. Instead we should recognise that the passages have undergone a cumulative process of interpretation (see Ibid., 150-151). Specifically, McCarthy proposes that the answer to Moses' question is found in 3:15, with 14a providing an explanation and 14b a tie with its repeated assonance between verses 13 and 15 (Dennis J. McCarthy, "Exodus 3:14: History, Philology and Theology," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 [1978]: 316).

words of Yahweh and his self-revelation occurs upon a backdrop of tradition and future promise, as well as the wilderness, and creates an expectation of who God is.[451]

The discussion of Yahweh's self-revelation will proceed in five sections that will discuss 'what's in the name of Yahweh?': (1) being and intimacy, (2) an intrinsically defined verb, (3) an ongoing revelation, (4) expectation of a faith response from Moses, as well as (5) risk, tension and vulnerability.

#### *5.2.1.1 What's in a Name? Being and Intimacy*

First, when Moses asks for the name of God, he is not just asking for a proper noun. Instead, Moses is asking a significant etiological question, as names for ancient Israelites are symbolic and function etiologically.[452] For example, 'The name of a god or person is not an accidental means of identification; rather it denotes the essence of a being. It is identical with his soul, and in the name the person is present. Only by disclosing the knowledge of his name does Yahweh enable his people to have communication with him'.[453] Thus, it is no surprise that Moses asks the question, 'what is your name?'[454] as he wants to know God's nature, while also promoting communication with him, for himself, as well as the people of Israel. Accordingly, Moses is asking, who are you and are you reliable to fulfil what you are promising?[455]

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[451] J. Gerald Janzen, "What's in a Name? 'Yahweh' in Exodus 3 and the Wider Biblical Context," *Interpretation* 33, no. 3 (1979): 233.
[452] Sigmund Mowinckel, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 125–126.
[453] Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 24.
[454] Waltke observes that Moses does indeed ask God, 'what (*mah*) is your name?', not 'who (*mi*) is your name?' The difference in the pronouns is that the 'what' asks for the meaning of the name, whereas the 'who' asks to know someone's name. Hence, this is why God responds with the etymology of his name and just not his name (Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 365).
[455] Durham states that the explanation of the name 'has to do with whether God can accomplish what he is promising. What is there in his reputation that lends credibility to the claim in his call?' (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:38).

What is probably most surprising though, is that God candidly responds to this inquisitiveness.

In addition, a name assists to create intimacy, for in ancient culture a name:

> … entails a certain kind of relationship; it opens up the possibility of, indeed admits a desire for, a certain intimacy in relationship. A relationship without a name inevitably means some distance; naming the name is necessary for closeness. Naming makes true encounter and communication possible. Naming entails availability. By giving the name, God becomes accessible to people.[456]

Hence, it is significant that God answers and reveals his name to Moses to foster relationship with his people, but more so that this is cultivated in the wilderness setting. Ostensibly, Moses' curiosity and questions are fostered by the raw wilderness, as what does he have to lose in this setting? This risk-taking appears to engage God and draws him out from the midst of the bush to reveal his name, and thus, himself. Yet concurrently, God desires intimacy as he responds to Moses' question, three times, in a unique revelation and profound explanation at this wilderness outpost. The isolation and ruggedness of the wilderness is viewed as the perfect place for the revelation of Yahweh's name and initiating an intimate relationship with Moses. The wilderness setting, away from distractions or prying eyes, can foster intimacy, encounter and risk-taking, despite or maybe due to, its underlying raw and unpredictable edge. But in this way, the wilderness echoes something of Yahweh; relational and desirous of intimacy, yet neither containable nor safe.

[456] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 65. Fretheim goes on to state, 'God and people can now meet one another and there can be address on the part of both parties. Yet, because name is not person, there remains an otherness, even a mystery about the one who is named' (Ibid.).

### *5.2.1.2 What's in a Name? A Verb and Intrinsically Defined*

Second, God responds to Moses and presents his name as a verbal root היה ('to be'). This is rare. Mowinckel indicates, there is no other divine name within the ancient Semitic world that consists of a verb only.[457] Specifically, this unusual verbal composition highlights the active nature of Yahweh in a way that a noun cannot. It illustrates that 'Yahweh (the Lord) is not an abstraction, but a living, acting, being',[458] who is revealing himself to his people. The Hebrew verb 'to be' (היה) is not, therefore, just about existing,[459] instead it means 'to be active, to express oneself in active being'.[460] Hence, Mowinckel suggests various translations for the name of God that includes, 'The God who acts' or 'I am what in creative activity I always and everywhere turn out to be' or 'I am (the God) that really acts'.[461] I would suggest that these specific translations by Mowinckel are especially pertinent in the context of the chaotic view of the wilderness. It indicates that the active 'I AM' God who is able to creatively turn the wilderness into holy ground, and later, the rod into a snake and make a hand leprous or restore it clean (4:1-9), is likewise able to creatively turn the Israelite slaves into a holy and freed people.

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[457] Mowinckel, "The Name of the God of Moses," 129.
[458] James K. Bruckner, "The Creational Context of Law Before Sinai: Law and Liberty in Pre-Sinai Narratives and Romans 7," *Ex auditu* 11 (1995): 45.
[459] Although Schild, amongst others, argues that the phrase is focused on defining God's existence. He states that according to the rules that govern Hebrew grammar the phrase should be translated as 'I am He who is'. The 'am' expresses identity and the 'is' his existence. Thereby concluding that 'God identifies himself as the One who is, the real one, and the one who exists' (E. Schild, "On Exodus III 14: 'I Am That I Am,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 4, no. 3 [1954]: 301). However, Gianotti (plus others) disagrees with his method of translation as well as his theological conclusion, as היה alone 'cannot support the "ontological" or "existence" view' (Charles R. Gianotti, "The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH," *Bibliotheca sacra* 142, no. 565 [1985]: 42).I would agree with the conclusions that Gianotti has drawn here.
[460] Mowinckel, "The Name of the God of Moses," 127.
[461] Ibid. Furthermore, 'in the Pentateuch, the form *ehyeh* occurs only nine times (Gen 26:3, 31:3; Exod 3:12.14 [three times], 4:12.15; Deut. 31:23) and always in God's speech' (Sonnet, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14)," 342, fn. 29).

Further, the name 'I AM' is defined intrinsically to God himself. There is no reference to any other thing, action, person nor place. As Janzen posits, whatever name had been used for God historically, the name 'Yahweh' is now

> to be understood in terms of intrinsic self-definition. Henceforth, "Yahweh" names God, not with reference to this or that specific instance or structure or order of actuality (as the divine power manifest in it or responsible for it), nor even with reference to the whole of actuality … From now on, "Yahweh" is that name which identifies Israel's God purely in intrinsic terms, as that divine power of existing which is defined or qualified or limited by no principle except the divine existential intention itself.[462]

Thus, with God defining himself through a verb and intrinsically, the setting of the wilderness is important, especially in its essence as a non-place. As God defines and reveals himself intrinsically, no reference to the earth, a cultic place nor mountains, for example, is needed. Thus a non-place, where God can reveal himself as 'I AM', without any outside referential materials is complementary. The wilderness setting, as a stereotypical non-place, performs this function perfectly.

#### *5.2.1.3 What's in a Name? Ongoing Revelation*

Third, with God's name being expressed as a verb, a dynamic and ongoing revelation is expressed. As Bruckner observes, God's name lacks specificity at the beginning of the Book of Exodus. Consequently, it is only through the unfolding events that the elusive name 'Yahweh' becomes laden with meaning.[463] This is due to God's 'I AM' presence displayed in action within the wilderness and the chaos of Egypt, as well as the development of relationship between God and the people. Gianotti defines this as 'the phenomenological view' in which God's manifestation to Israel is still being realised after the burning bush event, heavily linked to the Mosaic covenant and

[462] Janzen, "What's in a Name?," 235.
[463] Bruckner, "Creational Context of Law," 45.

illustrates that no matter what is required, God 'will "become" the solution to that need'.[464] Hence 'I AM' is God's promise that he will be faithfully God and faithful to redeem his people.[465] What is essential to note, however, is that the revelation of 'I AM' is initially grounded in the wilderness setting and dynamically develops from there. This, I suggest, is because the wild, barren and changing terrain of the wilderness setting naturally allows room for growth, transformation and development to occur in the revelation of God's nature.

Goldingay affirms the dynamic nature of Yahweh, suggesting that 'Yhwh may or can or will be anything that is appropriate or needed, or that Yhwh decides to be. … God has the capacity to be whatever Israel needs God to be. Whatever happens in the future, God will be there with Israel, and out of an infinitely resourced being, God will be what the situation requires'.[466] Thus, Yahweh is present with his people and the revelation of his name and nature in the wilderness is ongoing, not static, prescriptive or definitive. Accordingly, Ricoeur states, 'The appellation Yahweh—he is—is not a name which defines God, but one that signifies … '.[467] The revelation of Yahweh's name, therefore, is not to provide a fixed definition of God, but rather dynamically encompass the mystery and vibrancy of how Yahweh will be and act for Israel. The mobility of the wilderness landscape alludes to this relational development that will shape Yahweh and his relationship with his people.

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[464] Gianotti, "The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH," 45–46.
[465] Fretheim proposes that a good translation is "I will be who I am/I am who I will be", as it is saying 'in essence: I will be God for you. The force is not simply that God is or that God is present but that God will be faithfully God for them' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 63).
[466] John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 337.
[467] Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1–2 (1977): 18. Specifically for Ricoeur, the name of Yahweh signifies the act of deliverance.

### *5.2.1.4 What's in a Name? Faith Response*

Moreover, it is proposed that Yahweh reveals his name in the setting of the wilderness and in the time before the exodus event, to prompt the people to respond by faith to his nature. That is, the revelation of Yahweh's name is not to be just a reaction to his actions or 'deep theological truth; it is a call to the response of faith'.[468] Just as God will dynamically 'be' with Israel and his character continually revealed as situations arise, Israel is being asked 'to be' with Yahweh in dynamic commitment. Realistically, one of the hardest places to exist and 'to be' is the wilderness, as much energy is extended just to survive. Yet, I propose it is in chaos and even the non-place of the wilderness that the essentials of what is required 'to be' are utmost required. To continue, Isbell captures this concept of faith by observing that,

> For Israel, this divine willingness to say אהיה implied that faith must not be withheld until *after* a demonstration of divine power, faith which could so easily be retracted at the hint of a new crisis in which God had not yet acted specifically and openly to the satisfaction of everyone. Thus if the saying of אהיה meant that God had accepted his covenant responsibility to Israel in advance of and irregardless of particular untoward circumstances, it also constituted a challenge for Israel to respond covenantally as "people" in advance of whatever might lie in the future.[469]

Thus, by speaking the verbal name היה in a barren, cursed and non-place, Yahweh is asking Moses, and in turn the people, to respond directly to him without specific assurance or demonstrations. This is the challenge of faith, to respond and keep responding to 'I AM' who appears in the wilderness, in all mystery and ongoing development, with no guarantees.

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[468] Cole, *Exodus*, 70.
[469] Charles D. Isbell, "The Divine Name אהיה as a Symbol of Presence in Israelite Tradition," *Hebrew Annual Review* 2 (1978): 116–117.

#### *5.2.1.5 What's in a Name? Risk, Tension, and Vulnerability*

Finally, in this newly forged relationship, Yahweh's name invites relationship and presence, but it also invites risk, tension and vulnerability. First, it is 'a risky act for God to reveal it [his name], for once the name is "out there," it can be slighted or misused'.[470] Expressly, if God revealed a name that was fixed or was named by others,[471] this may have been used or abused within the magical environment of ancient culture.[472] The invocation of a deity's name, as magical formulas, blessings and curses within the ANE was common; wherein an invocation is 'actually attempting to gain control of deity and his power'.[473] Instead, Yahweh has neatly avoided anyone irreverently utilising his name by defining it ambiguously and by revealing it himself. Even so, he has also revealed new insights into his nature, previously unknown, which fosters intimate relationship.

Furthermore, many scholars affirm that the expression of God's name 'I AM' has covenantal, presence and relational overtones. Youngblood indicates that I AM 'when used by God, is in every case an affirmation of relationship',[474] and specifically that the name 'refers less to His mere existence than to His gracious presence'.[475]

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[470] Goldingay, *OT Theology*, 1:339.
[471] It is clear that the God is the one who reveals his name; he is not named by others (unlike Hagar who names God, for example, in a similar wilderness theophanic encounter). Fretheim comments that this is enlightening, as despite the name not being fully revealed, it does give insight into God and 'the giving of the name is thus a revelatory act' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 64).
[472] Randall J. Pannell, "I Would Be Who I Would Be! A Proposal for Reading Exodus 3:11-14," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no. 2 (2006): 353. Pannell is specifically drawing this conclusion by reading Exod 3:14 as a *cohortative* construction, in which the focus is on the speaker's will, intention and desire, in the first person.
[473] David R. Worley Jnr., "God's Gracious Love Expressed: Exodus 20:1-17," *Restoration Quarterly* 14, no. 3–4 (1971): 198. See also Riceour who states, 'To the extent that to know God's name is to have power over him through an invocation whereby the god invoked becomes a manipulatable thing, the name confided to Moses is that of a being whom human beings cannot really name; that is, hold within the discretion of their language' (Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 18).
[474] Ronald F. Youngblood, "A New Occurrence of the Divine Name 'I Am,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15, no. 3 (1972): 148.
[475] Ibid., 149.

Similarly, Isbell agrees, stating that אהיה is 'a symbol of divine presence', and it occurs in contexts 'wherein the presence (or absence) of God is of the utmost significance theologically'.[476] Hence, the name of Yahweh is used to confirm and reconfirm Yahweh's presence with his people, as well as his promissory nature to reassure that he will continue to be with his people.[477] Thus, in the setting(s) of the godforsaken wilderness and against the backdrop of Israel's slavery in Egypt, it is no surprise that a message of covenant and reassurance is sought. It is in these fierce landscapes that the need of presence is most crucial, and Yahweh answers this profoundly in himself, I AM. Thus, the wilderness revelation of his presence-associated name is no accident.

Moreover, the question of Moses 'what is your name?' and the answer Yahweh choose to gives, creates a perilously vulnerable time in a divine-human relationship. This element of risk is heightened further in Yahweh's *idem per idem* answer.[478] In effect this answer 'culminated debate by cutting it off, and from the point of view of the one being silenced the termination will be abrupt and premature'.[479] Thus, this was not a cosy chat between Moses and Yahweh. Although an intimate relationship is being forged, it is still very clear that Yahweh is the one in authority, leading and

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[476] Isbell, "The Divine Name," 101–102.
[477] Specifically Isbell states, 'The self-disclosure of Yahweh plainly included the willingness to speak a personal work about himself, to put himself on the spot promissorily and openly. It included his readiness to say, "I will be with you"; "I will become God to you"; and to say these things before his capacity to act changingly had been demonstrated in a given situation but also before the capacity of Israel to be "people" in a new situation had been demonstrated. In short, Yahweh's self-disclosure involved no less than his willingness to say to Israel, אהיה' (Ibid., 116).
[478] As God reveals his name as *idem per idem* 'the intention in the phrase may well be to make a comprehensive statement in which God claims to be "everything that I will be"' (112). Specifically, there are no problems with the specific grammar and syntax of this phrase, and it 'simply means "I am what/who I am"', however, 'it seems that the impersonal retrospective pronoun has been omitted from before the relative marker. Thus, the meaning is probably that "I am the one I am". The phrase, however, remains enigmatic … ' (Graham S. Ogden, "Idem Per Idem: Its Use and Meaning," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 53 [1992]: 112).
[479] Jack R. Lundbom, "God's Use of the Idem Per Idem to Terminate Debate," *Harvard Theological Review* 71, no. 3–4 (1978): 200.

terminating the conversation, despite Moses initiating the questions. An undergirding tenseness is apparent in the dialogue and a definitive name beyond *idem per idem* remains elusive.

Lundbom resolves the silencing of Moses by God, in his *idem per idem* response, by noting that God is acting in his 'gracious capacity' as he is promising to deliver the slaves and be present with them on their journey.[480] However, I find that this commentary too effectively resolves the issue that God has just terminated Moses' questions. Yet, later in his article, Lundbom concludes more carefully stating, 'When the *idem per idem* terminates debate there is always tension because the answer it gives will be perceived at the same time as a non-answer. … Theologically it is important that we preserve this tension lest the dynamic quality of biblical revelation be destroyed. God reveals himself while at the same time remaining hidden'.[481] I agree with this conclusion. There is tension in this narrative, especially in the non-answer of Yahweh to Moses, and this ought to be preserved. Hence, along with Sonnet, it is better to view the *idem per idem* construction as 'an expression of indeterminacy. God will be whatever he wants to be ... . It is YHWH's way to open an eventful future of unpredictable yet assured divine assistance, and the dialectic that holds together providence and unpredictability precisely constitutes the heart of suspense when it comes to the biblical God'.[482] The elements of risk, vulnerability and danger encapsulated in the text, therefore, should not be ignored, as it is a deep component of theophanic encounters aligned with the wilderness setting.

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[480] Ibid., 201.
[481] Ibid., 199–200.
[482] Sonnet, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14)," 336.

Overall, the silencing of Moses, the risk and vulnerability of revealing a name, the open and unpredictable future and the tension in the text are even more noteworthy when placed against the wilderness backdrop. Could such a perilous revelation occur in any other setting? Instead, the equivocation by Yahweh is well mirrored in a wilderness-scape. The risk and vulnerability of the divine-human encounter presents as a reason for why the personal, yet elusive, name of Yahweh is revealed first in the wilderness. The beauty of the wilderness facilitates intimacy, closeness and mystery. However, the harsh wilderness landscape also encapsulates risk and indeterminacy. Moses and God are encountering one another and forging a new relationship where the future is unknown, and each can influence, harm or affirm one another. Hence, the complexities of this encounter with its elements of both risk and vulnerability—essential to a good relationship—are harnessed against the rugged wilderness backdrop.

#### *5.2.1.6 Summary*

In sum, the revelation in Exod 3:1-4:17 of Yahweh's name 'I AM' in the wilderness setting is foundational. This is due to the wilderness being a setting that fosters intimate relationship and authentic revelation, as the wilderness is separate from distractions and other competing agendas. The verbal root and intrinsic definition of Yahweh's name is beyond normal convention, and is apt to be revealed in a non-place. The dynamic and ongoing revelation of Yahweh's nature is also captured well in the wilderness setting, where God is able to meet any need; even the most desperate. Further, the arid and barren wilderness setting that yields little acknowledges that the people are responding in an act of faith to the revelation of the name of Yahweh, before seeing his gifts or actions. Finally, the tension and risk that

occurs in relationship sits well within the threatening wilderness setting. Overall, there is a natural affinity of the wilderness setting to the intrinsic nature of Yahweh that makes it an ideal landscape to harness this self-revelation. Hence, it is not surprising that Yahweh reveals himself in the incongruous setting of the wilderness, and with an elusive name.

### 5.2.2 Yahweh Speaks: A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

The second message that I will explore in reference to Exod 3:1-4:17 is Yahweh's speech promising a land flowing with milk and honey. In the wilderness, God speaks to Moses about a flowing, oozing land of abundance and fruitfulness. I would suggest that this is a jarring juxtaposition. To speak a creative and verdant word like this in the barrenness of the wilderness is ill aligned. As the Promised—'milk and honey'—Land is the very opposite of Moses' current wilderness shepherding or even Israel's confined slave condition. Yet, this section will argue that the alternate picture of a fruitful land is all the more inspiring and redemptive because of the wilderness setting in which Yahweh speaks it forth.

#### *5.2.2.1 The Promised Land: Milk and Honey*

First, in Exod 3:8, the land that God promises is described in very vivid terms; 'a good and spacious land', 'a land oozing milk and honey' or as some suggest, 'a land flowing with fat and sap'.[483] This is a stereotypical way of describing the covenant

[483] Hamilton suggests that the term milk (*ḥālāb*) could with a vowel variation refer to fat (*ḥēleb*). And *dĕbaš* could be translated as 'sap' that includes reference to fruit, nectar of dates as well as honey (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 56).

land that was promised to Abraham and his descendents.[484] However, in the wilderness setting of this passage, the phrase 'milk and honey' is used for the first time in the canon. I would argue that through the contrast to the isolated and barren landscape, this message of 'milk and honey' is more distinctive than first realised.

Stern argues that the phrase 'a land flowing with milk and honey' is an 'important religious statement', due to its repetition within the text, but also because it shows that 'YHWH is a living god, who can reliably furnish the land of which YHWH is suzerain, with streams of milk and honey, i.e. fertility and abundance'.[485] This is similar to the tradition of the fertility cult of Baal, where 'the heavens rain fat/oil, and the wadis flow with honey'.[486] Even the Egyptian story of Sinhue who visits Canaan describes it in plentiful and abundant language.[487] Thus, the narrative is developed on the backdrop of traditional and religious perspectives of the ANE, which portrays God (or gods) as able to abundantly provide for the people. Further, Dozeman contends that the 'utopian images' of the Promised Land required divine revelation.[488] From this perspective, the description of 'milk and honey' highlights to us more about the character of Yahweh than it does about the land itself. It portrays Yahweh as a faithful God, who desires to deliver his enslaved people and bring them freely into a luxuriant land. Further, it signifies that Yahweh as their faithful covenant partner, is the one who sustains the fertile and fruitful environment.

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[484] This phrase is used fifteen times in the Pentateuch and five times in the wider OT. For example, Exod 3.8, 17; 13.5; 33.3; Lev 20.24; Num 13.27; 14.8; 16.13-14; Deut 6.3; 11.9; 26.9, 15; 27.3; 31.20; Josh 5.6; Jer 11.5; 32.22; and Ezek 20.6, 15. See Etan Levine, "The Land of Milk and Honey," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 87 (2000): 43.
[485] Philip D Stern, "The Origin and Significance Of 'the Land Flowing with Milk and Honey,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 4 (1992): 555.
[486] Ibid., 554.
[487] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 56.
[488] Dozeman specifically states, 'Yahweh must tell Moses about the land of Canaan (3:8, 17) before he is able to convey the information to the Israelites as cultic instruction' (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 129).

From an alternative perspective, Levine proposes that via a geographical lens, 'milk and honey' are 'products of identical topographical and economic conditions' to Canaan.[489] This is because 'in biblical Palestine as elsewhere, both milk and honey are not products of cultivated farmlands, but of uncultivated grazing areas. The flocks and herds feed on wild growth, on lands unsuitable for agriculture. And it is there, amid the thickets, bushes and wild flowers that the wild honey is found.'[490] Hence, these terms seem to have a natural affinity to the wilderness setting.[491] Subsequently, I may be incorrect in my hypothesis that hearing this statement in the wilderness is a jarring juxtaposition. Instead, could it be the familiarity and similarity of the wilderness landscape, which they will experience as part of their first residence post-Egypt that correlates with milk and honey sustenance?

However, Levine also notes that we must ascertain from the biblical context how the phrase is being used. Is a contrast being developed between 'milk and honey' and the context of the desolate wilderness or a productive farmland? Once determined, 'only then can there be clarity as to whether the reference constitutes a pastoral blessing or an agricultural curse'.[492] Thereby, in the context of Exod 3:1-4:17, the phrase is introduced in contrast to the wilderness setting and the larger narrative background of the slave arenas of Egypt. Thus, the text portrays the 'milk and honey' land of Canaan as a fruitful blessing because it is spoken in and contrasted with these spaces of wilderness and oppression.

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[489] Levine, "The Land of Milk and Honey," 44.
[490] Ibid.
[491] Even to the point that there is reference to the daily manna provision of the wilderness having a honey-like taste (Exod 16:31).
[492] Levine, "The Land of Milk and Honey," 50.

What is noteworthy in Levine's discussion is that the context of the message is just as important to the message, as the message itself, and actually aids in its interpretation. This thesis has progressed on this basis and gleaned many helpful insights. Overall, it therefore cannot be dismissed that the first time the phrase 'milk and honey' is used in the canon is in the wilderness landscape. This evokes the significance of Yahweh's words, because in such a barren and hopeless terrain the 'I AM' speaks words of hope, future and relationship that highlights the different and divergent nature of his rule that can transform any situation, no matter how wilderness-like.

#### *5.2.2.2 The Promised Land: A Place of Gushing*

Second, the context of fruitfulness, blessing and abundance is further highlighted in the stereotypical description; as the action of the land is described as 'flowing, gushing' (זוב, *Qal participle*) milk and honey. This is a term that typically refers to the movement of liquid, usually in a sizeable amount.[493] Surely the use of a 'liquid' term to describe the Promised Land is significant here in the arid wilderness space and aids in stimulating the imagination of Moses, and later the people of Israel. The daily threat of running out of water in the wilderness is replaced. Instead, the land they are being delivered into is 'gushing and flowing' with water, abundance and fertility. A great contrast is developed in this promise, and indubitably it is no accident that Yahweh chose to give this theophanic message of surplus and sweetness in the wilderness. Therefore, against the wilderness background the distinction, contrast and uniqueness of the Promised Land is even more anticipated.

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[493] James Swanson, "zûḇ," *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

Moreover, in reference to milk and honey, typically these substances never 'gush' in their natural forms, and 'most interpreters recognize a figurative dimension of the verb זוב in this context'.[494] Stallman explores three metaphorical implications of the phrase 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. First, Israel is invited to accept the promise that Yahweh has prepared and will provide for them in the land they are to enter.[495] This comment interweaves effectively with Stern's understanding discussed previously of 'milk and honey' being a religious statement, as it illustrates that the suzerain will provide for their vassal. Second, Israel is invited to see the land as abundant. Stallman specifically comments that 'for those who had heard stories of harsh slavery in Egypt and who themselves were living in the agriculturally deficient region of the Sinai, accepting the invitation to see the land as abundant was an act of faith'.[496] Third, Israel was invited to intimacy and participation with Yahweh, as Yahweh is the good host who not only provides a land that sustains and nourishes, but a land that also possesses the sweeter dessert-treats of life, as represented by 'honey'.[497] These latter two implications of 'gushing' are especially pertinent when reviewed on the wilderness backdrop. Abundance and the sweeter elements of provision are opposite to the survival existence eked out in the chaos of the wilderness. These words, once again, encourage the people to believe for an alternative reality to their situation and the contrast makes it all the more desirous and inspiring.

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[494] Bob Stallman, "The Place of Intimacy in the Interpretation of Biblical Metaphors: The Promised Land as Flowing with Milk and Honey" (presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Springfield, Mo, 2014), 3.
[495] Ibid., 10–14.
[496] Ibid., 13.
[497] Ibid., 13–14.

#### *5.2.2.3 Summary*

In summary, God speaks a word in Exod 3:1-4:17 in the wilderness that is diametrically opposed to their current position, encapsulating it in intense metaphoric language. In the barren wilderness, Yahweh speaks words of a good, sweet and gushing land. As a result, Yahweh is portrayed as a benevolent suzerain and provider, as well as saviour. Furthermore, by utilising metaphor the words have 'power to stimulate the imagination leading not so much to sure conclusions as to possible entailments or trajectories'.[498] Thus, Yahweh opens an invitation to Moses and the people of Israel beyond their normal oppressed existence. Thereby creating an alternative horizon (or even space or land) that is all the richer because of the disparate background: slave versus free, subsistence versus abundance, oppression versus intimacy, sustenance versus delicacies, dryness versus gushing, wilderness versus Promised Land.

## 5.3 EXODUS 19:1-20:21: YAHWEH'S WORDS

In turning to the second theophanic passage, Exod 19:1-20:21, and the words that are delivered during this theophany, there is much that could be said (and indeed has been). However, the task of this chapter is to examine the words of Yahweh, and why the wilderness setting was the chosen arena for the delivery of this message. This is a large task in reference to this pivotal passage; therefore I will focus the discussion on elements that are exemplary to the overarching messages given in the wilderness. In particular, the discussion will occur by (1) examining the overarching theme of Yahweh God speaking words in the wilderness setting. From this foundation, specific examples of Yahweh's message will be considered, which includes, (2) the 'I AM'

[498] Ibid., 13.

self-revelation of Yahweh, (3) the connotation of being out of Egypt and finally, (4) the new vocation of Israel in light of all the earth belonging to Yahweh.

### 5.3.1 Spoken Words in a Wilderness Landscape

First, the message in Exod 19:1-20:21 is framed as the spoken words of God. God speaks to Moses to inform him that he is appearing in the cloudy cloud so that the people may hear him speaking (19:9). This is picked up again in Exod 20:1 'And God spoke all these words saying … '. The whole setting of this passage, as well as the signs of Yahweh's appearing,[499] are presented to affirm that it was God who was speaking. As Ryken details, 'The God of glory is a God who speaks, revealing his word to his people. God's primary purpose in coming down on Mount Sinai was to give his law. The spectacular signs that accompanied his coming—all the fire and smoke—were partly designed to prove that it was God who was speaking to them'.[500] All that occurs at this wilderness mount is designed to create a place where God is central and his speech is paramount. As a result, a primary question of this Exod 19:1-20:21 section is why is the wilderness space utilised as the forum for God's speaking the Ten Words and Law?

In the theophanic encounter in Exod 20, the Ten Words are portrayed as the direct speech of God to the people. Moses is not acting as an intermediary.[501] Thus, Yahweh and his personal interaction with the people of Israel is central to this theophanic encounter. They are all included, and not just Moses. Miller highlights, '… to the best

[499] See chapter 4.
[500] Ryken, *Exodus*, 515.
[501] In fact, Exod 20:1-17 breaks the pattern of Moses speaking for Yahweh, and 'the people's request in 20:19 that Moses, and not God, speak to them lest they die reinforces that fact' (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 316).

of my knowledge, these are the *only* words that the Lord speaks to the whole community in *all* of the Old Testament. Never again does God speak directly to the whole community. … The *whole of scripture* serves, therefore, to lift up these words to a special place, separating them off from all other divine instructions'.[502] Therefore, this direct address of God to Israel, 'demonstrates the high position in which it was held by the community; there could be no question of its having been God-given'.[503] Thus, the Ten Words are promoted above the rest of the law, due to being directly spoken by Yahweh.[504] In light of the significance of this rare direct speech by Yahweh, with its weighty message, it is peculiar that the setting of these words is the wilderness. Thus, out of all the places that Yahweh could choose to speak, the wilderness is chosen.[505] This reinforces the proposal that the wilderness is a setting where God is at home and a preferred place for God to reveal himself, the reasons for which I will now discuss.

#### *5.3.1.1 Yahweh's Words: Focus Attention on Yahweh*

The pivotal words of the Decalogue are narrated as being spoken personally to the Israelites to individually focus their attention on Yahweh. This is indicated by '*you*

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[502] Patrick D Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 22 (emphasis original).
[503] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 223.
[504] Miller, *The Way of the Lord*, 4.
[505] Wellhausen asks a similar question of 'why Sinai' was the setting for the Torah. In response he answers 'It was the Olympus of the Hebrew peoples, the earthly seat of the Godhead, and as such it continued to be regarded by the Israelites even after their settlement in Palestine (Judg. v. 4, 5). This immemorial sanctity of Sinai it was that led to its being selected as the ideal scene of giving of the law, not conversely' (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, 439). Thus because of the associations already with Sinai 'as a mountain of God', this was a natural place to develop the legislation of the Torah. Further, he also contends that the depiction of Yahweh 'with his own mouth thundered the ten commandments [*sic*] down from the mountain to the people below… [was] for the sake of producing a solemn and vivid impression, that is represented at having taken place in a single thrilling moment which in reality occurred slowly and almost unobserved' (Ibid.). However the giving of the Ten Words took place, whether slowly developed or in a 40-day event, or at an already sanctified memorial site or a site that will become memorialised, the narrative depicts this occurring in the Sinai wilderness and with Yahweh as the central character, to emphasise the Words significance.

shall' or '*you* shall not' being in the second person singular, and not the second person plural form.[506] In this way, Yahweh is shown to be personally conceiving and establishing an intimate relationship to each and every Israelite present in the wilderness of Sinai, not just mechanically promulgating a law code.[507] The Ten Words therefore, offers access to life, but also to Yahweh. Hence, the first four commands emphasise the personal relationship of Israel with Yahweh, in which faithfulness, worship and relationship are required.

In addition, the arena chosen to foster intimacy and the attention on Yahweh is the wilderness. This is no surprise as Leal observes that the speaking of the law 'as an expression of a close relationship between God and man necessitated an environment of intimacy unimpeded by other cultural and religious factors. The wilderness provided this environment'.[508] The wilderness setting is ideal for the spoken words of Yahweh, due to its isolation and spatial distance from past and future civilisations, governments and rules. By being in the middle of nowhere, without any defined cultural structures and no formalised wilderness norms yet in place, the community becomes centralised around Yahweh and his voice. The foundational, fundamental and defining characteristic for Israel, therefore, becomes the personal Yahweh. Thus, the emphasis is not so much on the specific words themselves but upon the one who is

[506] Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 414; J. M. Sprinkle, "Law and Narrative in Exodus 19–24," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (2004): 236.
[507] Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:162. Likewise, Exod 19:3-6 also emphasises the personal interaction of God with his people. For 'Israel is to give heed to "my voice" and to keep "my covenant". Israel is to be "my own possession" and be "to me" a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Terence E. Fretheim, "'Because the Whole Earth Is Mine': Theme and Narrative in Exodus," *Interpretation* 50, no. 3 [1996]: 233). It is clear that the emphasis is on personal relationship, and that Yahweh is the focus and initiator of this. Subsequently, the law is given within this personal relationship framework.
[508] Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:163.

speaking, Yahweh.[509] It is Yahweh and his voice, which reverberates in the wilderness and remains central in the imaginations of Israel. The initial commandments illustrate this as it focuses on exclusive loyalty to Yahweh and possesses 'cultural neutrality'[510] here in the wilderness. So with everything else stripped away, Israel clings to the one thing that is stable and defining—Yahweh—his words and his presence.

Moreover, the non-descript, isolated and barrenness of the wilderness create 'an ideal situation where exclusive loyalty could be required'.[511] This is further attenuated, as the people have not yet received the fullness of what is promised, and are not settled in the land with all its provisions and realities.[512] Hence, the wilderness is a key place for the focus to be on Yahweh, for himself. As Fretheim acknowledges, 'Israel is to keep God himself as the focus of its loyalty and allegiance. Because the law initially comes as a direct divine address, as God's word delivered in person, it keeps the law orientated in terms of personal relationship'.[513] Thus, in the wilderness, there is no confusion or distraction by land, promises, other cultural trappings or blessings. Instead, in the raw wilderness, it is just Yahweh and the people of Israel, with a promise of their future together.

#### *5.3.1.2 Yahweh's Words: Bring (Re)Creative Order*

In regards to the impact the landscape has on the message that Yahweh chooses to speak, it can be observed that just as the wilderness setting is beyond domestication and management by the community, so are the words spoken by Yahweh. As

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[509] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 327.
[510] Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible*, 72:163.
[511] Ibid.
[512] Even though many of the laws are focused on a landed-existence, at this time the motivation for keeping the many laws that are land-related is not a priority. Instead, the priority is Yahweh.
[513] Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 233.

Brueggemann highlights, 'The Decalogue is uttered directly from the mouth of Yahweh, so that fundamental Torah requirements are lodged primarily in Israel's originary experience—beyond explanation, criticism, or management'.[514] Thus, once again, the wilderness aptly captures the free and authoritative nature of Yahweh and his giving of the Ten Words. The words of the theophany cannot be categorised or limited, rather, they remain profoundly 'wild' in setting up the framework of the Israelite community, their relationship with Yahweh and their identity as a freed people. So much so, that 'it becomes possible to say that Israel's religious life as a partner of Yahweh begins in the wilderness. The desert is the place of God's initial and fundamental revelation to his people'.[515]

In saying this, specifically in regards to the 'originary experience', the setting of the wilderness aligns with the chaos to creation motif portrayed in Gen 1. In the exodus event, the people of Israel are removed from the chaos of oppression, slavery and an opposing order[516] to be (re)created into the people of Yahweh who will steward the abundant land of milk and honey. Therefore, as the spoken word of God created order out of chaos and formlessness in the Gen 1 creation narrative, Yahweh's spoken Ten Words creates (re)order out of the opposing order of Egypt or even the chaos of the wilderness. Specifically, 'Creation consists in establishing lawfulness out of confusion, and for the Israelites this becomes: to create habitable land out of desert

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[514] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 569.
[515] Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 27.
[516] It could be argued that Egypt was the epitome of order and structure within the ANE. However, whilst it may be ordered and structured, it was not according to the rule and ways of Yahweh. Thus, the wilderness becomes a liminal space in which the people are (re)created in Yahweh's ways to prepare them for Yahweh's order that is required to maintain the gift of the Promised Land. Jonathan Burnside aptly highlights this contrast through his case study on the Sabbath-gatherer (Num 15:32-36), where the actions of the person gathering on the Sabbath is seen as fostering Egypt's order and thus, anti-Yahweh. (See J. Burnside, "What Shall We Do with the Sabbath-Gatherer? A Narrative Approach to a Hard Case in Biblical Law (Numbers 15: 32-36)," *Vetus Testamentum* 60, no. 1 [2010]: 45–62).

land, light out of darkness, a continent out of an ocean'.[517] Hence, in the liminal wilderness, a holy nation and royal priesthood is created out of slaves, and the promise of a flourishing land is envisioned for those who dwelt in Egyptian ghettos.

In this way, the words of the commandments purposefully echo the words of creation, as both are fundamental in bringing order and form, whether to the formless and functionless creation or the formless and functionless Israelite community.[518] Thus, in this analogy, the void and wide-open places of the wilderness become the place to inculcate form and function in Israel. That is, the divine ordering of Yahweh will be applied in all their interactions, with each other, the land and all creation.[519] Specifically,

> In the Pentateuch, law is evaluated positively. It is a gift; it is the barrier against chaos, the antidotes to directionlessness. … By rooting the law in Israel's beginnings in the wilderness, the authors claim that the structured society is the ideal. The seeds of structure are planted in the wilderness but grow only in the land.[520]

Thus, the wilderness is a liminal-bridge between the chaos of Egypt and the fullness of the new creation of the Promised Land; inspiring freedom and transformation like no other setting. In this way, the wilderness can be portrayed as the womb from which Israel was birthed.[521] It is, therefore, no surprise that Yahweh is portrayed as speaking ordering words in this chaotic uncreated place.

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[517] Pedersen, *Israel*, I–IV:472.
[518] Miller, *The Way of the Lord*, 33.
[519] Specifically, Fretheim states, 'The law is a means by which the divine ordering of chaos at the cosmic level is actualized in the social sphere, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The Egyptians have been an example par excellence of how the justice of God's world order has been subverted, creating injustice, oppression, and social chaos. The law is given to the people of God as a vehicle in and through which Egypt will not be repeated among them. The law is a means by which the cosmic and social orders can be harmoniously integrated, whereby God's cosmic victory can be realized in all spheres of human interaction' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 204).
[520] Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, 19.
[521] 'It must suffice to say that Israel's belief in Yahweh's choice which made her his elect people is grounded in the exodus event. Once more, the wilderness is the womb of a fundamental datum of the

This is not to say though, that the wilderness is without its own chaos influences. Typically, the chaotic elements in the Pentateuch are portrayed as the influence of Yahweh in response to Israel's lack of faith and obedience (for example, plagues [Num 11:33; 16:46-50; 25:1-9], fiery serpents [Num 21:4-9] and fire [Num 11:1-3]), as compared to the overt opposition to Yahweh that Egypt represented. Within the biblical text, the law and the boundaries that it establishes, envision order and fruitfulness. Indeed, obedience to the law made the land harmonious, whereas disobedience to the law reverts the land to its wasteland, trackless and chaotic nature. Either way, the image depicts the wilderness as a place in which Yahweh is very comfortable and which he utilises for his own purposes, whether to foster relationship or provoke discipline. Ultimately, Yahweh's wild words are spoken in the wilderness at this time act to order, ground and define Israel's future.

#### *5.3.1.3 Yahweh Speaks: Dynamic and Universal Words*

Scholars repeatedly make it clear that the law given at Mount Sinai is not closed, static and/or solidly fixed. Instead, 'The Torah as mediation includes an open-ended dynamic and an ongoing vitality that goes beyond Moses … '.[522] In this regard, I cannot help but suggest that the wide-open setting of the wilderness is essential in portraying both the dynamic as well as universal nature of the law.

The law is dynamic and open. This is fostered well in the wilderness backdrop. Therefore, just as the wilderness setting requires a dynamic approach to survive

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religion of the Old Testament without which its development would be unintelligible' (Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 29).

[522] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 583.

within its barrenness and threatening nature, it is proposed that the law dynamically cultivates the best of life within the climate of a chaotic and threatening world. For example, the law is open-ended, as new occasions will teach new responsibilities.

> In fact, God's surprising and unconditional move on Israel's behalf is a standing invitation for Israel to go beyond the law. To be gracious as Yahweh has been gracious means that the people of God must always be on the lookout for ever new ways to conform their lives to that of God himself. And God's ongoing gracious activity will continue to point the way to such new vistas for life.[523]

Thus, Israel is not to view these words as closed and inert, but freeing, open and ever progressing.[524]

Additionally, many commentators have recognised the universality of the promulgation of the law, especially the Decalogue. But what has not been explicitly developed is that the setting and landscape of the wilderness is ideal to convey this universal perspective of God's nature. Waltke is the exception when he observes that 'the Ten Commandments are not restricted to geography or history. Whereas the other laws were intended for Israel in the Sworn Land (Deut. 5:31)'.[525] Typically, no account for the setting of the law-giving and its influence on the words is given by commentators.

However, I would suggest that the Words and their prologue, in light of their location in the wilderness and the covenant relationship that Israel is being called into, all

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[523] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 224.

[524] Fretheim specifically observes that, 'for the ordinances to be placed at a number of points in the ongoing story (from Exod 12 to Deuteronomy) means that the law is not viewed as eternally given in a certain form; it is not immutable, never to be changed in its form or content. The laws are time-bound. The law is always intersecting with life as it is, filled with contingency and change, with complexity and ambiguity. It moves with the times, taking human experience and insight into account, while remaining constant in its objective; the best life for as many as possible. This constantly changing life of the people of God means that ever new laws are needed: New occasions teach new duties' (Ibid., 206).

[525] He further states that 'the Ten Commandments are not bound by time or space. … They express God's fundamental moral stance' (Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 413–141).

coalesce to demonstrate that the entire earth is Yahweh's. Thus, the words spoken in this space are to be heard reverberating throughout the earth and not just echo in the wilderness. Therefore, it can be said, 'The law given at Sinai, then, is not a new reality but a fuller particularization of how the community can take on its God-given creational responsibilities in view of new times and places'.[526] Consequently, the wilderness setting in its unassuming nature, allows for Yahweh's revelatory words, and allows Israel's formation to be imagined and relevant for the entire earth. In this manner, it can be concluded that the wilderness is the perfect place for Yahweh and his purposes to be revealed to the entire earth. It is a non-place, not caught up in religious-geographical-cultural-politics. The wilderness is the perfect place or indeed a 'utopian place'[527] for God to speak words that are universal and dynamic.

#### *5.3.1.4 Summary*

In summary, I propose that Yahweh chose to speak the Ten Words and Law in the wilderness on purpose. First, the isolation encourages intimacy and draws the attention to Yahweh first and foremost. The words are spoken in the wilderness to foster intimate relationship with Yahweh, as well as to demand exclusive loyalty. Second, Yahweh speaks wild words that transform Israel into their form and function, just like the creational words. Finally, the wilderness setting provides the backdrop for words that are dynamic, open-ended and universal. These are not words that once spoken are fixed and static. Instead, they are to progress and cast their redemptive

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[526] Terence E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus," *Interpretation* 45, no. 4 (1991): 363.

[527] The expanded citation states: 'Sinai is, however, a utopian place. It is temporally and physically outside the state authority. The association of divine law with this place is completed by steps, which the catastrophe of Israel both enabled and compelled. Sinai became the fulcrum of a legal system not connected with the power of the state and therefore not an expression of tradition and custom' (Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*, trans. Allan W. Mahnke [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996], 57).

themes beyond the wilderness into the wider earth. Overall, the wilderness enables Yahweh's words to be chief and to echo in their enormity.

### 5.3.2 The 'I AM' Self-Revelation: Ten Words Founded in God

Having discussed the broad theme of Yahweh speaking directly in the wilderness, I will now turn to specific examples of what Yahweh says in the wilderness setting. This section will consider the self-revelatory words of Yahweh.

The very first word that God directly speaks to the Israelites is in regards to himself and his relationship with them, he says—'I AM Yahweh your God' (20:2). Yahweh's name, the I AM, is central to the focus of this divine revelation and theophanic encounter with his people. This self-revelation becomes like Exod 3, the basis for all that will follow, especially in regards to how law and covenant are initiated with ancient Israel. Specifically, these words also frame the guidelines for Israel and their view of themselves, that is, they are to be a people who belong to Yahweh *their* God.

In fact, these first words of the self-revelation of Yahweh provide the context for ancient Israel to interpret the Ten Words. Hence, by stating, 'I am Yahweh your God'[528] from the start of the speech, the words are orientated relationally. Further, this self-revelation of 'I AM Yahweh your God' becomes the basis upon which the covenant vocation and legal revelation of Israel is established. Yahweh has integrated his story with ancient Israel in this setting and even shown identification with them.[529] Thus, obedience is viewed by Israel as obedience based on relationship with Yahweh

[528] In terms of the grammatical formation of this phrase, 'The "I" ('anoki) is both emphatic and the subject; Yahweh is the predicate' (Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 479).
[529] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 100.

God, not a generic god or even the law on its own terms.[530] The focus thereby, remains keenly on Yahweh and his relationship with them—individually and corporately, especially as he is '*your* God'.[531]

The response of Israel's obedience, also presumes the historical remembrance of the divine name of Yahweh, who is the One who delivered and rescued Israel and acted faithfully on their behalf.[532] Subsequently, obedience is in response to Yahweh and all that he has done for Israel. Therefore, the breaking of God's law is 'making a direct assault on God himself. To worship another god is to deny God's sovereignty; to misuse his name is to deny his honor; to steal is to deny his providence; to lie is to deny his truthfulness; and so forth'.[533] The relationship with Yahweh is the primary foundation upon which all motivation, obedience and inspiration of the covenant is to be based for Israel. Therefore, where else can this point be obviously made, except for the desolate landscape of the wilderness that is barren of competing voices and agendas, as well as the liminal place of formation. To illustrate this in more detail, this section will examine (1) the echoes in the wilderness of Yahweh's Name 'I AM', (2) Yahweh being a wilderness law-giver and finally, (3) Yahweh's wilderness authority and freedom.

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[530] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 224.
[531] Fretheim also comments, 'The appeal is to a deeper motivation for obedience: these are the commands of "the LORD *your* God". The address is to the individual "you", and not to Israel generally, lifts up the importance of internal motivation rather than corporate pressure or external coercion' (Ibid., 222).
[532] Noth, *Exodus*, 162; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 192.
[533] Ryken, *Exodus*, 528.

#### *5.3.2.1 Yahweh's Name 'I AM' Echoes in the Wilderness*

It is worthwhile to note that the name of Yahweh given here in Exod 20:2 recalls the encounters of Exod 3:1-4:17 and pre-empts the revelation in Exod 33:18-34:8. In fact, within three of the four wilderness theophanies that this thesis is examining, the divine revelation of the name of Yahweh is central.[534] Particularly, the Exod 3:1-4:17 and 20:1-21 speeches of Yahweh's name bracket the exodus event. In effect, this highlights that 'God tied the promise of his deliverance of Israel from Egypt with his name, Yahweh. Once that promise became a reality, he proclaims his name once again. All that Yahweh is, says, and does is embodied in this one affirmation: "I am Yahweh"'.[535] Thus, the revelation of the name Yahweh, including its significance discussed in the previous section (#5.2.1), is affirmed and expanded upon here in Exod 20:1-21. That is, Yahweh, whose name was partially defined in Exod 3:1-4:17, has shown himself to be active and dynamically involved with his people. This is reinforced at the Mount. He is the 'I AM' who is alive and active on Israel's behalf. His name and nature is an ongoing revelation through the many events that make up the exodus (and will make up the people's journeying to the Promised Land). The multi-faceted essence of Yahweh is that 'he is' and 'will continue to be' all that Israel needs. Thus, by reciting the I AM name here at Mt Sinai, it 'recalls the action of God towards Israel, which is already indicated by the divine name Yahweh, precedes the commandments and is the justification for them'.[536] Yahweh will continue to be for Israel all that they need—whether salvation, redemption, provision, relationship—this all comes from Yahweh, who is *their* God.

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[534] Is this any surprise in a book called 'names': שמות?
[535] Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 479.
[536] Noth, *Exodus*, 162.

It is especially noteworthy for our purposes, that the revelation and gift[537] of Yahweh's name is a consistent message within the theophanic appearance of God in the wilderness. God is the generator and author of his name as he speaks forth his message in the wilderness. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that Yahweh prefers a wilderness place as a site of revelation and that the wilderness contributes to the revelation. The text assigns the wilderness landscape, with its complexity and ambiguity, alongside its characteristics of marginalisation, barrenness and isolation to hold this special revelation of the words of Yahweh and his name, to deepen the uniqueness of the revelation. The wilderness landscape allows Yahweh to become accessible, vulnerable, present, concrete and close. However, it also portrays him as wildly free, beyond domestication, in control yet unmanageable.

#### *5.3.2.2 Yahweh: A Wilderness Law-Giver*

A key effect of the giving of the law, in the wider Exod 19:1-24:18 pericope and the Pentateuch, is to portray the character of God.[538] This is especially due to the premise that the spoken words of a person illustrate their character. Thus, in the theophanic law-giving in Exod 19:1-24:18, (and especially Exod 20:1-14, which comprises the direct speech of Yahweh), God's character is demonstrated.

In reference to this passage, many things can be observed about the law-giver Yahweh. Sprinkle summarises that 'the law-speeches show God to be a moral, law-giving king who structures not only the religious aspects of his people's lives, but all

[537] Fretheim asserts that, 'the gift of the name of God entailed the gift of God's self' (Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 101).
[538] Ryken, *Exodus*, 525–527.

aspects of their lives'.[539] Similarly, Ryken affirms this concept noting, 'The law always reveals the character of the lawgiver. This was especially true at Mount Sinai, where every one of the Ten Commandments was stamped with the being and attributes of Almighty God'.[540] Ryken specifically unpacks this to show that 'the Ten Commandments display the character of God. They reveal his sovereignty, jealousy, justice, holiness, honor, faithfulness, providence, truthfulness and justice'.[541] The content of law and how it reflects the character of the lawgiver, Yahweh, is a thesis in itself. However, what I note is that Yahweh brings the people to the mountain of God in the wilderness to give the law and be revealed. This is clearly not accidental in the world of the text and the location influences this message.

Expressly, as Exod 20:1-14 is the direct speech of Yahweh (and not mediated through Moses) to the individuals who make up the whole community of Israel, 'then what gives the commandments their authority is not so much what is said as much as who says it, not so much the unique content as the unique speaker'.[542] Hence, we observe that the primary emphasis detailed by Exod 20:2 is first, the pre-eminence of God speaking; second, God speaking to all Israel; and third, that in the presence of all the people he reveals himself as 'I am Yahweh your God'. Thus, above all else, the overriding message is on Yahweh himself not the specific legal requirements. He is the key focus here in the wilderness. This is no surprise as the law itself requests the exclusive allegiance of the people to Yahweh. But through speaking the law directly to the people in the wilderness, Yahweh also reveals himself personally, powerfully

[539] Sprinkle, "Law and Narrative in Exodus 19–24," 239.
[540] Ryken, *Exodus*, 525.
[541] Ibid., 527.
[542] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 327.

and relationally, creating the best scenario for them to hear and respond to his voice, in the quiet ruggedness of the wilderness landscape.

#### *5.3.2.3 Yahweh's Wilderness Freedom and Authority*

To prioritise the focus on Yahweh, a third point is that the wilderness is the likely landscape for the self-revelatory speech 'I am Yahweh your God' for there are no distractions, no other rulers, and no other competing voices to be heard. The space of the wilderness and its liminal nature especially emphasise Yahweh's freedom as well as Yahweh's authority.[543]

The wilderness at Mt Sinai is an ideal setting to observe the freedom of God. The wild-landscape illustrates that Yahweh is not locked down to a particular historical setting or place or even definitive name. It highlights that he is beyond the boundaries of a land or nation. He is universal in his freedom, aims and intentions. Hence, he does not confine the giving of the law to the land of Canaan, the place where they will settle, but instead, reveals himself in this unpredictable non-place by which Yahweh declares his universal reign over the whole earth, even the abandoned non-areas. Similarly, the setting of the wilderness also portrays the dynamic nature of the law itself. We discover a revelation of 'a God who is in lively, pulsating relationship with the people, and hence the law is not to be conceived in fixed or static terms. The God who personally interacts with the people in ever-changing situations throughout their wanderings is the one who gives the law for the sake of the best possible journey'.[544]

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[543] Balentine, *Torah's Vision*, 119.
[544] Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 233.

Indeed, he has chosen Israel to be his very own people, out of his free will and decision.

Moreover, the authority of Yahweh is highlighted in his spoken words and actions. He is portrayed as the law-giver. He is Israel's suzerain, who has shown himself sovereign over Egypt, as well as the creational elements of the wilderness sojourn. Now, through the words that Yahweh speaks to Israel, he is expecting full allegiance from the people he has delivered for himself. Similarly, the boundaries of holiness that demarcate Sinai are clearly identifying him as separate and powerful; he is not to be approached indiscriminately. Subsequently, the words spoken by Yahweh clearly indicate his authority, as the people respond in fear (Exod 20:20). All in all, the wilderness setting frames the nature of Yahweh and the words he speaks, displaying him in freedom and authority.

#### *5.3.2.4 Summary*

In summary, the first words that Yahweh speaks directly to Israel at the Sinai wilderness outpost is 'I AM Yahweh your God'. By so doing, the Ten Words are introduced and the relationship of Yahweh and Israel is inaugurated. In this, the primacy of the self-revelation of God clearly portrays the exclusiveness of Yahweh and his desire to integrate his story with theirs. Further, the self-revelation establishes all the words of covenant and law that follows on the foundation of relationship with Yahweh. The nature of the lawgiver is clearly revealed through these words. Yahweh has, and will continue 'to be', all that Israel needs. Additionally, Yahweh's freedom and authority is also displayed. Speaking, these self-revealing words in the

wilderness, provides insight into who Yahweh is and invites Israel to foster a relationship exclusively with him.

### 5.3.3 Out of Egypt, the House of Slavery

Moreover, at Sinai, in the prologue for the Ten Words (Exod 20:1-21), God connects his 'I AM' name with his salvific actions. That is, God is their God because he rescued the people 'out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery' (Exod 20:2). In this one sentence, Yahweh's personal revelation is connected with his redemptive action, and this frames the introduction of the Decalogue. In our wilderness motif-ed thesis, these words of Yahweh are worth briefly investigating, due to the narrative-geographical language used.

#### *5.3.3.1 The 'I AM' Name and Redemption*

To begin, a connection between the name of Yahweh and the action of 'bringing out the people from Egypt' is developed. This is significant for the 'reference to divine redemption from slavery immediately after the self-introduction underscores how foundational liberation is to understanding the divine name Yahweh'.[545] Thus, Yahweh as a redeemer is essential to understanding the meaning of Yahweh's name alongside his character. Moreover, through the people's location—the Wilderness of Sinai—Yahweh has shown authority, freedom and redemption over not only Egypt, but also the wilderness-scape. They have been 'brought out'. The landscape of the wilderness as the backdrop and its association with wide, open and free spaces, pictures the complete redemptive action of Yahweh geographically. Yahweh is the 'I

[545] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 480.

AM' over all, including nations, peoples, non-human creation and spaces, whether wilderness or urbanised. This geographic freedom further illustrates the liberation and salvation that affects all aspects of Israel's life.

#### *5.3.3.2 House of Slavery*

In addition, the image that is proclaimed by Yahweh is that he brought the people out of Egypt but also out of 'the house of slavery'. This is evocative. The closed in and oppressive image of houses of laves or as Dozeman translates 'slave barracks'[546] fortifies the difference between Egypt's agenda and Yahweh's. Egypt is acknowledged for their repressive constraint and domineering rule as captured in the image of 'slave barracks'. However, Yahweh's redemptive freedom and gracious albeit exclusive rule is illustrated by the wild, open spaces of the wilderness and the challenging and fearful Mount Sinai. It is against this geopolitical perspective—Egypt versus Sinai—that the divine name of Yahweh is revealed, and exclusive worship of Yahweh is invited not demanded.[547]

#### *5.3.3.3 The Liminal Wilderness*

Also, as the people have been redeemed out of slavery into freedom, their newfound freedom is a progressive revelation. The wilderness becomes the liminal landscape through which the people of God will learn what the shape of a 'brought out' and redeemed people looks like.[548] The wilderness is the transformative space for this to occur, and into this space the law is given. Thus, 'the one who has released Israel

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[546] Ibid.
[547] Ibid.
[548] Further, it must be noted, 'Hence the law is not understood as a means of salvation but as instruction regarding the shape such a redeemed life is to take in one's everyday affairs' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 224).

from Egyptian-imposed boundaries will now speak to Israel about Yahweh-imposed boundaries. There is a world of difference between boundaries that enslave and boundaries that energize, boundaries that destroy life and boundaries that direct life'.[549] I would also propose that by explicitly referencing the different landscapes—Egypt and Sinai—the different ways of life are highlighted and visualised.

Specifically, what must be at the forefront of Israel's understanding is Yahweh's salvific and redemptive action. Therefore, the self-revelation of Yahweh to Israel as a community at this point in their relationship fortifies the subsequent giving and interpretation of the law to occur 'as an outgrowth of the salvation of the Israelite people. Thus salvation and law become intertwined in Exodus'.[550] The salvific work of Yahweh, who has brought them to this mountain and has delivered and redeemed them from out of Egypt, is now central.

The changes in the landscape settings additionally highlight the salvation journey as Israel has departed the chaos of Egypt. This is portrayed through the origin-mythic imagery of the piled up chaotic waters separated by dry land of the Reed Sea crossing, bringing them into the liminal non-descript wilderness to encounter Yahweh for themselves, before experiencing the fullness of the promise by entering a land characterised as oozing with milk and honey. As a result, these three landscapes—chaotic Egypt, liminal wilderness and flowing Promised Land—depict the redemptive journey and progressive revelation of Yahweh's salvific work, in which the wilderness is the liminal space between chaos and promise.

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[549] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 328.
[550] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 474.

#### *5.3.3.4 Summary*

In summary, God's theophanic revelation is connected with the redemptive words 'out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery'. With this location-specific language the salvific action of Yahweh is displayed. Yahweh, the I AM, is the one who has brought Israel out into a new geographical space. He has brought them out from the land of Egypt and the house of slavery, and all that this represents regarding oppression and tyranny, into the wide-open spaces of the wilderness and thereby, liberty of Yahweh's rule. Further, it is in the liminal wilderness space that Israel's redemption is established and codified.

### 5.3.4 Because All the Earth is Mine

A final theme that this section will explore is Yahweh's initial words to Moses within the theophany of Exodus 19:5b where God declares, 'indeed, all the earth is mine'.[551] The implication of being brought into a wilderness space to hear that 'the whole earth' is God's is significant. God incongruously brings the Israelites to what is in essence a non-place, the wilderness, to hear a message that all the earth is his. Yet, because of God's wider whole-earth vision, especially as it links to Israel's role as 'a unique treasure', and 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (19:5-6), this is a purposeful move. To unpack this, this section will examine it through four angles of (1) new vocational vision, (2) the entire earth being God's, (3) the specifics of Israel's vocation and (4) the theme of holiness.

[551] The Hebrew כי has an assertive or causal function in this verse. (See Ibid., 437).

#### *5.3.4.1 New Vocational Vision*

First, the portrayal of the people of Israel as Yahweh's treasure corresponds to the promise given to Moses in Exod 3:8 of a land flowing with milk and honey in the wilderness. These extraordinary revelations regarding where and who Israel is to be are both fostered against the backdrop of the wilderness. As highlighted previously, the contrast between the slave-now-freed-people and God's vocational vision appears to shine best when given in a non-place. That is, a seemingly impossible vision thrives against the backdrop of the formless wilderness. Thus, in this vast and open environment, the future prospects of Israel can truly be opened up and imagined without competing voices or other hindering elements.

Similarly, for Israel to hear about their larger vision and destiny as a 'unique treasure', 'kingdom of priests' and 'holy nation', it seems that the people needed to be in a place that was not home, not comfortable nor even settled, to recognise the unlimited nature and fullness of this message. Through being in the wilderness, the harshest and most isolated of all places, the people could see that if God was present with them here and if he could remove the chaos for them in this space, then he could do this in well-watered hills and agricultural fields of Canaan or even in the entire earth. Thus, the wilderness becomes a trial-space, in which God is able to prove he is the 'I AM' for them, and this revelation could subsequently be translated to other spaces and possibilities.[552]

[552] Fretheim especially highlights this, by noting that in Egypt anti-creational effects are seen, whereas in the wilderness, blessing and life-creating effects are seen. He states that 'in the wilderness stories God's cosmic victory is made evident in that the natural order provides for life and blessing rather than deprivation and destruction' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 176). To illustrate he provides some of the following examples. In the first plague the people of Egypt 'could not drink the water' (15:23), but compares this to being in the wilderness where the bitter waters are made drinkable. In the seventh plague, hail is 'rained' down upon Egypt and destroys their food sources (9:18, 23). This is likened to manna being 'rained' down from heaven (16:4) and thereby, providing food. Similarly, in the eighth plague, locusts

#### *5.3.4.2 Entire Earth Vision*

Second, the specific phrase 'the whole earth is the Yahweh's' (19:5) has significant impact in exemplifying Yahweh as superior and ruler over all. Not just over ancient Israel, but also Egypt and even the wilderness. Explicitly, this phrase shows 'the reversal of the domination of chaos and the proclamation of the Lord's reputation, that the Lord might be known "in all the earth" (19:16)'.[553] This transformation also echoes the refrain and purpose of the exodus account, that *all* will know Yahweh.

Hence, an earth-wide perspective is being fostered in the isolated place of the wilderness. The comprehensiveness of the wording is captured in the verse by Fretheim's proposed translation: '*because (kî)* all the earth is mine, so you, you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'.[554] Thus, ancient Israel's redemption is placed in the midst of a wider purpose, that is, to support the redemptive mission of God for the whole earth. It can be concluded, therefore, that 'while God's liberating activity centres on the small community that is Israel, the world provides the horizon in view of which events take place. … God's redemptive activity on behalf of Israel is not an end in itself; it is in the service of the entire creation, for "all the earth" is God's'.[555] Ultimately, all that occurs in this crucible of the wilderness is for the renown of Yahweh to be known throughout the entire earth. And out of all the places on the entire earth to disseminate Yahweh's message, the wilderness, with its associated marginalisation, barrenness and isolation, as well as liminal characteristics,

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'came up' and 'covered' the land (10:14-15) destroying the food supply, whereas in the wilderness, quail was provided for Israel that 'came up' and 'covered' the camp providing food (16:13).
[553] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 173.
[554] Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 237 (emphasis original).
[555] Ibid.

is an ideal setting. This is because the wilderness is a place that is beyond the normal religious-political-cultural conventions and expectations, and hence, can promulgate a message for the whole earth.

Thus, the entire earth vision reinforces why it is significant that Yahweh speaks in the wilderness, by revealing his name and his character through lawgiving, and that he has redemptively brought Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness. It illustrates the paradigm for Yahweh's purposes in 'all the earth'. Therefore, just as ancient Israel is uniquely coming to know Yahweh and relate to him as his personal possession—in this remarkable wild-place—so too, is the entire earth invited into the redemptive purposes and to hear the words of Yahweh, in their equally wild-places.[556]

As a final comment, as land is a priority within ancient culture and tightly knitted to the religious-political sphere of life, when God notes that the whole earth is his, it once again reinforces that the promise of the Promised Land is a gift from God, not an issue of human rights.[557] Ultimately, as Fretheim states, 'Redemption is for the purpose of creation, a new life within the larger creation, and, finally, a new heaven

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[556] Further, it should be observed that Yahweh's redemptive activity is not confined just to humanity but creation and the non-human are involved as well. Hence, in the Exodus account transformation occurs via the redemptive activity of God both for ancient Israel and the non-human creation. For example, the undrinkable waters at Marah are made sweet, manna and quail are rained down from heaven, and water spurts forth from a rock (See Exod 15:22-24; 16:4-36; 17:1-17). As such, 'the wilderness that the people initially experienced as an inhospitable place was made hospitable', all because the whole earth is Yahweh's (Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, 173–174). Furthermore, Yahweh's salvific purposes are all-inclusive, with creation—land, non-human and humanity—all linked together. As a result, 'the whole creation was thus at stake and involved in the Israelites' decision at Sinai' (Bruckner, *Exodus*, 173–174). Accordingly, the response of Israel to Yahweh's words in the wilderness is pivotal, for they were invited to redemptively partner with Yahweh as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for the 'entire earth'.

[557] Specifically, Fretheim states, 'Given the close relationship between God and land, the land is an issue of divine right, not human rights, and human beings are to treat it accordingly, as gift not possession' (Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005], 139).

and new earth.'[558] Here in the wilderness setting, Yahweh is making the audacious and daring claim that the whole earth is his, and not just Canaan or the wilderness.

### *5.3.4.3 Israel's Vocation*

Third, it is because the whole earth is the Lord's that the vocation for Israel is endorsed. That is, they are a unique treasure and called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to the whole earth (Exod 19:5-6), not just their Promised Land. Hence, a larger redemptive purpose for Israel is being developed in the formlessness of this wilderness space. The wilderness place is one of the few places, which is removed from the normal boundaries that govern humanity and is where one can expect a world-embracing vision to be proclaimed. In effect, what is learnt at the margins and in obscurity will become the foundation for living a redemption-filled life. To discuss this further, I will engage with the two vocational declarations that God speaks. Firstly, that Israel is to be a 'unique treasure' and secondly, that they are to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' via a narrative-geography lens.

#### *5.3.4.3.1 Unique Treasure*

In 19:3-6, a key phrase is used by Yahweh to describe Israel, סגלה. This has been variously translated as 'peculiar treasure' (KJV), 'treasured possession' (NIV) or 'my own possession' (RSV). This term סגלה highlights Yahweh's personal affection for Israel, for this language is used to describe the wonder and value of close relationships.[559] Expressly, Greenberg has concluded that the Hebrew term סגלה 'comes to mean a dear personal possession, a "treasure" only in that sense of that

[558] Ibid., 111.
[559] Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 233.

which is treasured or cherished',[560] regardless of its economic value. Thus, the focus in this passage is on Yahweh who esteems and values Israel 'purely by virtue of his own will and desire' not for anything that they will contribute to him.[561] It would also seem that this is exemplified further by the people's location in the wilderness. In the barren and isolated wilderness, it is very clear that ancient Israel does not have much at all, if anything, to contribute to Yahweh. Instead, the focus is primarily on Yahweh and Yahweh's choice.[562]

Moreover, as 'unique treasure' is placed first in a list of three descriptive phrases, it highlights 'the special affection the Lord has for Israel'.[563] Thus, the uncontainable and abandoned nature of God is aptly displayed here in the rugged wilderness. In fact, this choice and phrase yet again reveals more about Yahweh than Israel. He is wildly free in choosing whom he wills, for *indeed* all the earth is his.

*5.3.4.3.2 Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation*

In addition, Yahweh calls Israel a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in the wilderness of Sinai (Exod 19:3-6). Although seemingly incompatible terms are employed, this claims 'that all aspects of Israel's life are pertinent to the fulfilment of God's purposes, not just the religious sphere'.[564] The terms also propose a new vision for the relationship that Israel is to have to the world, in that their vocation is 'to be

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[560] Moshe Greenberg, "Hebrew Segullā: Akkadian Sikiltu," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 71, no. 3 (1951): 174.
[561] Enns, *Exodus*, 388.
[562] In addition, Hamilton shows that the four times the phrase סגלה is used in Exodus and Deuteronomy, it is coupled with the call to holiness (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 302). Specifically, he relates that the linking of holiness and 'unique treasure' deters against sliding into lawlessness or legalism, which occurs when סגלה or holiness is emphasised to the exclusion of the other. I agree with his emphasis here, for סגלה and holiness are both required of Israel as Yahweh's covenant people. This is significant in relation to the discussion in #5.3.4.4.
[563] Ibid., 303.
[564] Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 235.

the people of God in God's world. The phrases look not inward but outward, beyond the self or the community'.[565] Israel's redemption by God was not an end in itself, but to commission them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for his wider purposes that encompass 'the entire earth'. Thus, Yahweh's select covenant relationship with Israel is made in the wilderness on behalf of the world, so that 'God's initially exclusive move is for the sake of a maximally inclusive end'.[566] The wilderness setting therefore, becomes the bedrock for God's spacious and extensive redemptive purposes, as in this formless space anything can be formed.

Overall, in the wilderness space, the vocational vision of Israel is spoken and formed by Yahweh. In view of the whole earth, they are to be Yahweh's unique treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

#### *5.3.4.4 Holiness*

Fourth, in correspondence with the theme of holiness that has arisen within previous chapters, the words of Yahweh in Exod 19 continue to emphasise on holiness. Expressly, the term קדש is used in various forms five times within God's words in Exod 19 (19:6, 10, 14, 22, 23).[567] These encompass the occasions Moses is asked to consecrate the mountain by marking off its limits and the people through the ritual of time and washing, in preparation to encounter Yahweh. This highlights the seriousness of this pre-arranged theophanic meeting. However, what is pertinent to this thesis is the focus on holiness, especially as it is developed in the wilderness setting.

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[565] Ibid.
[566] Ibid., 237.
[567] Gentry, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament," 404.

What is the connection between the themes of holiness, the words of Yahweh and wilderness? At this point in the text, the theme of holiness prompts us to recall the holy ground of the burning bush event. The call of Moses is accentuated by the mention of holy ground, and thus, the holy nature of Yahweh who calls him is reiterated. Similarly, we see that Sinai itself is demarcated as holy by the different boundaries enforced around the mountain plus the ritual consecration of the people in preparation for the theophany of God (Exod 19:10-15, 20-25). In these events, there is a tension between the separation that holiness enforces between a holy God and his people and the consecration required to draw near. As Dozemann observes, 'The drama in the revelation at Mount Sinai is to overcome the separation inherent in holiness to fulfil the divine promise'.[568] Similarly, Gentry proposes that 'the ban on going up on the mountain does not imply a radical separation or barrier between the people and the mountain. On the contrary, the people are invited to participate in the theophany, not simply as spectators, but as consecrated. The place *and* the people are ready to receive God because they belong to Him'.[569] Thus, it could be proposed that in the wilderness, the boundaries and space of holiness that usually enforce separation are overcome in place of consecrated relationship. This is not to say that there are no barriers or boundaries, but the normal boundaries are suspended and Moses and all the people are invited to draw near and to stand on holy ground, as seen at the burning bush and now in Exod 19-24.[570]

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[568] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 415.
[569] Gentry, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament," 407.
[570] Further, what is significant is that these wilderness holy-grounded events will become the precursor to the emphasis on holiness that is developed throughout the Sinai sojourn. This is especially highlighted within the Tabernacle Laws and the Holiness Code of Leviticus, in which the focus is Israel becoming holy. This is in contrast to the book of Deuteronomy where the people are recognised as holy. For example, in Exodus-Leviticus, the refrain is: 'You shall be holy', whereas in Deuteronomy it is: 'You are holy'. The assumption is that the people are still to become holy, and as a nation their

Consequently, linking this holy wilderness setting to the message being proclaimed that the whole earth is Yahweh's, holiness is recognised as pervading the whole world through Israel's representation as a holy nation. The dust of the wilderness that represents their liminal transformation is to be carried to all the other places that are chaotic and un-holy to similarly transform them. Therefore, the appearance of Yahweh in the wilderness is pivotal to the message and transformation of the entire earth.

#### *5.3.4.5 Summary*

In summary, this section has explored the message of 'all the earth' being Yahweh's. It is proposed that these words were spoken purposefully in the wilderness, due to its non-place nature. In the hidden non-places a large vision and destiny can be imagined, as there are no norms, boundaries or expectations reducing the God-words. As such, an earth-wide all encompassing vision is spoken by Yahweh in this wild-wilderness space. It is a vision that casts Israel's vocation as a unique treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Here at the boundaries, Israel hears Yahweh's words of devotion, holiness and destiny. Further, what is heard in the most chaotic place—the secluded wilderness—will impact the entire earth.

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holiness will naturally occur through the creation of the tabernacle, priesthood and sacrificial cult. Furthermore, Regev argues that this is the specific difference between the Priestly and Deuteronomic portrayal of holiness. The Priestly School views holiness as dynamic, sensitive and dangerous, fitting into a larger cosmic and theocentric worldview. Whereas, the Deuteronomic School pictures holiness as static, a legal status, with less restricted access for holiness derived from God's will and not concerned with active world-ordering. (See Eyal Regev, "Priestly Dynamic Holiness and Deuteronomic Static Holiness," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 2 [2001]: 243–261; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 305; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 446). It is the attention to the role of holiness, though that is pertinent in Exod 19:1-20:21. It is implied that the wilderness is an arena for fostering holiness, as Israel learns to obey and follow the holy presence of Yahweh.

### 5.3.5 Summary: Exodus 19:1-20:21

Overall, to summarise the words that Yahweh speaks in his theophanic appearance in Exod 19:1-20:21, they are foundational to the redemptive relationship of Yahweh and Israel. The words are all the more poignant and substantial due to being spoken in a wilderness landscape. This is because first, Yahweh speaks directly to Israel the momentous Ten Words, using the wilderness space to emphasise the magnitude of the moment. This results in the attention being exclusively focused on Yahweh, which in turn, highlights Yahweh's words as cultivating a (re)creative order for Israel, as well as being dynamic and universally pertinent. Second, in the wilderness setting Yahweh once again identifies himself as the 'I AM' but this time, distinctively in relation to the Ten Words. In this way, Yahweh relationally connects his story with Israel's, and portrays that 'I AM' is all Israel needs. Third, Yahweh speaks of his redemptive action through geographic imagery. That is, God proclaims that Israel is brought 'out of Egypt, the house of slavery' and by inference into the liminal space of Yahweh's wide-open wilderness; a place where Israel now hears Yahweh's re(creative) words that brings freedom, identity and relationship. Finally, Yahweh states in this wilderness theophany that 'the whole earth is mine' and identifies the unique vocation of Israel in connection to the whole earth. It is in the barren and secluded wilderness landscape that an entire earth vision can be portrayed. The implementation of which will occur through the new identity of Israel as Yahweh's unique treasure, kingdom of priests and holy nation is formed and formalised in the wilderness.

The wilderness, with its characteristics of liminality, barrenness, isolation and being at the margins, assists these aforementioned words of Yahweh to resound and be

regarded as even possible and imaginatively harnessed, not only for ancient Israel, but even today.

## 5.4 EXODUS 24:9-18: YAHWEH'S WORDS

In the second part of the Sinai theophany, Exod 24:9-18, the theophanic experience is recorded with no words spoken, by Yahweh or any of the characters. This section will briefly examine why there were no words exchanged in this theophany, before moving back to the key focus of words in the wilderness I am addressing in this chapter.

### 5.4.1 No Words Spoken

In Exod 24:9-18, the theophanic encounter is an experiential and visual experience. No words are exchanged. Rather, the text focuses on the seventy elders with Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu 'beholding God' (24:11). Maybe this is because 'when God shows up, it is simply that his glowing presence be enjoyed and experienced. Any conversation is out of place. God's verbal presence has come earlier. Now it is time to bask in his visual presence'.[571] However, this is at odds with Savran's thesis. Savran concludes that when communication within a theophany has already been established, there is usually a reduction in the visual elements and a greater emphasis on words.[572] I would suggest that there are no words in this encounter because the people have just confirmed, 'All that Yahweh has spoken, we will do' (Exod 19:8; 20:19). Thereby, they have illustrated their ratification of the covenant, and thus, words are no longer necessary. The focus instead has turned to obedience and action.

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[571] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 442.
[572] Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 16.

Additionally, no words being spoken may be as a result of the elders glimpsing the feet of Yahweh through the sapphire pavement. This encounter is not described in the usual terms of seeing face to face. Thus, through the distinct separation via the pavement, a full conversation may have been prevented.

Nevertheless, whatever the reason, the narrator portrays no words or message being spoken in this encounter. Thus to remain focused on 'words in the wilderness' that this chapter is exploring, I will now consider Exod 33:18-34:8.

### 5.5 EXODUS 33:18-34:8: YAHWEH'S WORDS

To complete the examination of the words spoken in the wilderness, this section will discuss this in conjunction with the final theophanic passage, Exod 33:18-34:8. To review, this theophanic appearance occurs against the backdrop of the golden calf incident with Moses interceding with Yahweh that he must remain with them. Thus, the image of the recent anger and punishment of Yahweh is uppermost in the interpreter's mind. Through Moses' intercession Yahweh relents and states that he will go with the people. As a result, Moses seeks Yahweh's reassurance by requesting 'Now, show me your glory' (Exod 33:18) to know for sure that Yahweh is still with them. However, in response to this, God calls out (קרא) verbally instead of revealing himself visually (ראה*)* as Moses desired. The theophanic encounter initiated by Moses' request is outworked primarily in the speech and auditory mode despite Moses' visual appeal. In light of this, this section will consider (1) the indirect answer of Yahweh to Moses in sound and not in sight, (2) the declaration of Yahweh's name

and personal attributes, (3) the Ten Words being (re)received and finally, (4) a new wildness in the proclamation of Yahweh.

### 5.5.1 Yahweh's Answer: Indirectly via Sound and Not Sight

First, Yahweh does not reveal himself visually in this encounter as expected; instead, he speaks. Yet even when he does speak, his response to Moses is indirect. This requires examination before specifically examining the specific words spoken.

To begin, I propose that the reason behind an auditory-focused theophany rather than a visual-focused encounter is linked to Yahweh reinforcing the law of no idols and images (Exod 20:3-6). This thereby distances Yahweh from the visual representation of the golden calf incident and precursor to this theophany. In this way, Yahweh separates himself from other gods, as Yahweh speaks and is present although hidden, whereas the golden calf cannot speak but is visible. Further, the revelation of the name of Yahweh has central place in this theophany, which reinforces the law of Exod 20:7, esteeming Yahweh's name and not misusing it. When this theophany is viewed through this lens, Yahweh maintains the priority of his previous words and distinguishes himself from the actions of Aaron and Israel. As a result, he does not show himself as asked by Moses, but instead prioritises speech. This further aligns with Savran's previously mentioned thesis, that when there has been prior communication the visual elements decrease and speech increases.[573]

[573] Ibid.

In addition, when Moses requests to 'see God's glory' (Exod 33:19), which is understood to be a request for the 'full self-disclosure of God's glorious person',[574] God rephrases the request but clearly states, 'you cannot see my face' (33:20).[575] Thus, what Moses is asking for 'is more than Yahweh is willing to grant'.[576] This is peculiar, as Moses' question parallels his earlier request in Exod 3:14, to know God's name, which God freely answers at that time.[577] Again, the contrast is most likely due to the backdrop of the golden calf events, and that Moses and Israel will no longer be privy to God's unmediated presence. Even so, the passage is narrated by first stating what Yahweh will do, before stating that Moses will not be able to see his face.[578]

In respect to God's rephrasing, Irwin has observed that Moses and God speak at cross-purposes in 33:12-17. That is 'neither party to the dialogue responds to what the other has just said. This single feature, more than any other, gives the dialogue its shape and tone'.[579] The overall effect of this is a delayed or withheld response, which 'illustrates Yhwh's speaking to Moses as friend to friend'.[580] This pattern continues in the passages that we are interested in, especially Exod 33:18-23 and 34:5-10.[581] I

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[574] J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 629 (2001): 39.
[575] The request to see someone's glory is understood to see the very essence of a person. This is due to the link between 'glory' and the verb meaning 'to be heavy', (a close synonym for face or presence), which is used to describe the heaviness or weightiness of someone's reputation or essence (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:451).
[576] Ibid., 3:452.
[577] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 1976), 595.
[578] In summary, what Yahweh gives to Moses is 'quite specifically *not* the *sight* of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a description, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but of how he *is*' (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452). Further, there is also a play on the word 'פנים' occurring in this passage, which is seen in Exod 33:14-15 and again in 33:20-23. (Daniel W. Ulrich, "Between Text & Sermon - Exodus 33:12-23," *Interpretation* 56, no. 4 [2002]: 412).
[579] William H. Irwin, "The Course of the Dialogue Between Moses and Yhwh in Exodus 33:12-17," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1997): 630.
[580] Ibid., 635.
[581] Ibid.

suggest this is significant due to the wilderness setting creating an atmosphere where an intimate, delayed, although frankly charged response is acceptable.

Moreover, while Irwin sees greater intimacy and friendship in this exchange, I posit that the misfiring dialogue is also part of the cycle of creation-fall-new creation evident in this section of the Book of Exodus. Therein the cross-purposes of speech highlight the devastating effects of the golden calf incident and its impact on clarity of communication between Yahweh and his people.

### 5.5.2 Yahweh Proclaims His Name and Personal Attributes

Second, in the Exod 33:18-34:8 theophanic wilderness encounter a key message Yahweh speaks is to reveal his name and himself in a new way. Specifically, Yahweh proclaims to Moses a 'virtual exegesis'[582] of his name that outlines his character. This section will summarise the revelation, and the correlations of this message in connection to the wilderness setting.

The proclamation of Yahweh commences with a double revelation of Yahweh's name to Moses, 'Yahweh, Yahweh' (34:6). From the start of this theophany, the salvific, present and covenant name of God is emphasised. As Durham states, the double occurrence of יהוה is 'a deliberate repetition of the confessional use of the tetragrammaton, emphasizing the reality of Yahweh present in his very being, linking this proof to Moses to the earlier proof-of-Presence narratives that are begun in Exodus 3, and providing an anchor line for the list of five descriptive phrases to

[582] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 301.

follow'.[583] By this time, there is weighty historical richness for Moses and Israel in the name. The name Yahweh personalises the theophanic encounter as well as grounds it in the exodus and Sinai events. The name of Yahweh is indeed a motif throughout all the wilderness theophanies, and one cannot help be captured by the relational nature of God who reveals himself in presence, words and name. He also shows that he is remaining constant to Moses and Israel, and that the same 'I AM' who delivered them from Egypt, has delivered them from their current predicament of disobedience.

Further, this wilderness revelation of Yahweh's name is linked to specific divine attributes (Exod 34:4-7). Chiefly, five divine attributes are stated. These are compassion, graciousness, slow to anger, abounding in covenant love and faithfulness.[584] What is pertinent to realise about these five divine attributes is that it builds on the language and syntax of the law against idolatry in Exod 20:5-6, yet in a manner that is astonishing and profoundly new. For example, Yahweh will now show love and mercy first before judgment, a reversal of Exod 20:5-6. God is no longer referred to as a jealous God. Similarly, there is an absence of conditional language in Exod 34 that is seen in Exod 20:6, such as 'to those who love me and keep my commandments'. Indeed, God's love and mercy to Israel is independent of Israel's obedience or disobedience.[585] This is powerful in light of the backdrop of the golden calf incident. Even so, God's mercy is not to be taken for granted or abused, as God

[583] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:453. Gerhard von Rad also states 'This name shared directly in Jahweh's own holiness, for indeed it was, so to speak, a double of his being' (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:183).
[584] Although it must be noted that 'Yahweh's incomparability is not in any one of these affirmations, but in the odd collage of all of them together. Thus one cannot generalize beyond Yahweh—one cannot speak generically about this God' (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 228).
[585] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 737; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 576.

does still reserve the right to punish the guilty.[586] This though, is no longer included within the divine attributes. Fretheim observes wrath is now a response to the historical situation 'not a continuous aspect of the nature of God'.[587] As such the emphasis is on the divine mercy and grace of Yahweh. Judgment is removed from the beginning of the attributes, not linked to the character of God and moved to the very end of the speech.

Overall, the wilderness is once again the significant place where Yahweh reveals these unique facets about his character and self. The wilderness seems to foster revelation and even vulnerability. In fact, Dozeman notes that the 'new revelation of the name Yahweh is filled with pathos', with the references to physical emotions and affections developed within the attributes.[588] Herein, the wilderness continues its role as a place to foster revelation, especially the intimate, personal and dynamic revelation of Yahweh.[589]

### 5.5.3 Ten Words (Re)received

Exod 33:18-34:8 recounts how the Ten Words are re-given to Moses. These Words, despite the golden calf incident and Moses' shattering of the initial stone tablets, remain pivotal to ancient Israel. In Exod 34:6, Moses re-climbs the mountain to confirm the Divine Words again. At this point, the audience wonders whether the

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[586] Brueggemann further comments that after the golden calf events, that 'Israel knows that there is a dimension of the unsettled in Yahweh, making a relationship with Yahweh endlessly demanding and restless. This second half of the adjectival testimony asserts Yahweh's freedom, so that Yahweh's fidelity does not become Yahweh's domestication' (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 227–228).
[587] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 302.
[588] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 738.
[589] Brueggemann particularly notes that the adjectival terms used in Exod 33:6-7 are relational. See Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 225.

Words would be altered or changed, in view of the golden calf incident. But as the narrative makes clear, Moses returns with exactly the same Words; nothing added, nothing removed. The requirements remained the same, 'the original tables were shattered, but the original Words remained firm and clear'.[590] This is underscored three times within the text that the Words being received are exactly like the 'first ones' (Exod 34:1, 4).[591]

Again, in order to facilitate the new revelations and allow room for mercy and grace to arise, the setting of the wilderness landscape is apt. The wilderness captures the elements of rigidity in its cragginess and rocky cliffs, but also movement, due to its shifting borders and life's adaptation to limited water. Hence, to understand Yahweh as gracious as well as loyal and just, the wilderness setting captures this perfectly. Yet as mentioned, what does alter is the maturity and intimacy fostered in Yahweh's self-revelation that impacts Yahweh and Moses' relationship.

### 5.5.4 Yahweh Proclaims: A New Wildness

Finally, in continuing the theme of the personal revelation of Yahweh's essence via his words, the proclamation of Yahweh's name in the wilderness, especially within such a wild, craggy and unpredictable setting allows for change, movement and 'wildness' in the character of God unlike any other.

This can be observed in relation to the double emphasis of Yahweh's name. It is suggested that this repetition is included to emphasise the 'moment of the original

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[590] Charles D. Isbell, "The Liturgical Function of Exodus 33:16-34:26," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2001): 30.
[591] Ibid., 29–30.

revelation of the gracious character of God'.[592] In this encounter, there is a new revelation of God's character. This character change is so significant, for without it, the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh would not be able to continue in light of the idolatry of the golden calf event.[593] Thus, in the moving wilderness sands Yahweh is revealed afresh, as one who chooses grace, embraces Israel and reveals mercy and compassion, hereto unrevealed.

Further, the pivotal revelation of the Ten Words in Exod 20:1-17 promotes the attribute of divine justice as first and foremost among Yahweh's qualities. However, in this passage after a crisis of faith and relationship, the attributes of mercy and grace are promoted, and justice is cast in second place. This is remarkable and surprising, as one would expect the momentous Words of Yahweh to remain set and firm. Yet now far from 'being bound by any order whatsoever, God, we now understand, is free to rank his attributes the way he chooses—*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*—and he wants them slanted here in favour of mercy'.[594] To me this is telling, as Yahweh describes, reveals and illustrates himself as he desires. His freedom and wildness is illustrated exceptionally in the wilderness with the ability to choose grace over anger and punishment. This is also seen as vitally important to the faith of Israel, as the image of the gracious and forgiving God forms the theological centre of these events and consequently their creed.[595]

Lastly, without the intercession of Moses and this new proclamation of Yahweh, the attributes of justice as per Exod 20:1-17 could portray a strict and unyielding God.

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[592] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 735.
[593] Ibid., 737.
[594] Sonnet, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14)," 345.
[595] Isbell, "The Liturgical Function of Exodus 33," 28.

Instead, at this wilderness mountain, space for mercy is created and there is openness to new possibilities. Remarkably, forgiveness creates new horizons. The forgiveness of God in this passage shows 'Yahweh's infinite power of possibility in the face of the actual impasse arising out of the rigidities of guilt and offended innocence. Forgiveness enters into the impasse, on both sides, as a melting of the situation and as an opening'.[596] In fact, this whole scenario that seemed doomed for all was recast, specifically through the new development in the character of Yahweh as revealed through his words. The wilderness setting allows for this to be fostered, or at the very least, did not provide any hindrance to this change. By contrast, it is assumed that a settled and fixed urban setting would not allow for such freedom and movement in the character of Yahweh in these formative encounters.

### 5.5.5 Summary: Exodus 33:18-34:8

In summary, this section has reviewed the words and message that Yahweh spoke in the wilderness theophany of Exod 33:18-34:8. It has highlighted once again the affinity of the wilderness to be an ideal backdrop to the new and ever changing revelation of Yahweh. First, in the respect that Yahweh changes the theophany from being visually orientated to verbal. Further, God does not answer Moses directly in this theophany and even speaks at cross-purposes with him. The wildness of the wilderness harnesses this aptly. Second, Yahweh is able to proclaim his name once again in this setting as well as expand upon it to include five new divine attributes. Further, Yahweh's words show a higher level of intimacy and vulnerability, remove conditional language, and announce a preference of love and mercy before judgement. Therefore, the wilderness can contain the reversal as well as new declared attributes

[596] Janzen, "What's in a Name?," 238.

of Yahweh exceptionally. Third, the Ten Words are (re)received in the wilderness, in their originality and solidness. Finally, this whole encounter essentially advances a new wildness in the depiction of Yahweh. Overall, it is surmised that the wilderness is a unique space in which Yahweh speaks freely.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION: YAHWEH'S WORDS IN THE WILDERNESS

In this chapter, I have engaged with the words that Yahweh spoke in the wilderness theophanies. It is clear that God is not silent in this space. The דבר resounds in overwhelming ways in the מדבר. Indeed, Yahweh is uniquely revealed and formatively speaking in the wilderness. I will conclude, therefore, by reviewing two key themes that were most prominent throughout the four examined Exodus passages. That is, the wilderness is a place for (1) Yahweh's words of self-revelation and (2) a place for Yahweh to speak visionary words.

### 5.6.1 Wilderness: A Place for God's Self-Revelation

First, in the wilderness theophanies God speaks to be uniquely revealed. In the theophanies where Yahweh speaks within the wilderness (Exod 3:1-4:17; 19:1-20:21; 33:18-34:8), the 'I AM' name of Yahweh has central prominence. Expressly, Yahweh reveals the 'I AM' name for the first time in Exod 3:14, at Mount Sinai, Yahweh connects the salvific actions of the exodus and the event of covenant-making to his personal 'I AM' name (Exod 20:2), and there is a re-proclamation of Yahweh's name 'I AM', twice, with further personal attributes made known in the final theophanic passage (Exod 34:6-7). Thus, the wilderness becomes the setting where Yahweh chooses to be named as the 'I AM', but more so where God chooses to self-reveal in a new, intimate and ongoing manner.

I suggest that the wilderness is used purposefully as the setting to reveal God's name, as it is a setting that can harness a new revelation of who God is. The wilderness initially captures the essence of Yahweh's name in its unusual verbal and intrinsic identification. The wilderness also offers intimacy in the revelation, but also risk. In the moment of revealing something so personal as a name, there is also the opportunity for the revelation to be abused. Yet, the marginal and liminal space of the wilderness is perfect to capture the newness, exclusivity and risk of knowing Yahweh's name, as it is a landscape of both wonder and threat.[597] Moreover, the wilderness allows for dynamism and growth in the revelation of Yahweh's name. As in each subsequent theophanic encounter, the name is used differently and so provides further insight into the nature and character of Yahweh. 'I AM': deliverer, covenant-creator and mercy-giver. Yahweh, revealed as wild and free as the wilderness itself.

Furthermore, Yahweh is authentically self-revealed in the wilderness via exclusive speeches to the people. The direct speech of God, especially of the Ten Words in the wilderness, highlights Yahweh's vulnerability, character and desire for personal relationship with his people. Obedience, therefore, is connected to the 'I AM' name and exclusive words of Yahweh. The priority becomes relationship first, not the law. Moreover, the barren, liminal and isolated wilderness enables the focus to be directed exclusively on the self-revelation of Yahweh and his words. Indeed, by means of the

[597] In addition, Freedman notes, 'What emerges as distinctively Mosaic in the name formulas are the qualities and attributes of the Creator God of the Fathers revealed in the unique historical setting of the Sinai covenant, between the past event of the Exodus, and the future prospect of the Conquest. These are grace and mercy, patience, great kindness and devotion, all of which mark the action by which he delivers his afflicted people, creates a new community, – and not least the passionate zeal by which he bind Israel to himself in an exclusive relations of privilege and obligation, of promise and threat, of judgement and mercy' (David Noel Freedman, "Name of the God of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, no. 2 [1960]: 155).

desolate and chaotic landscape, Yahweh's personal and universal words resound, revealing Yahweh's character most intimately.

### 5.6.2 Wilderness: A Place of Visionary Words

Second, the wilderness is the ideal forum for transformative and visionary words to be spoken by Yahweh, as well as heard by Moses and the people. In fact, Yahweh daringly proclaims messages that are at odds with the barren and marginal wilderness setting. However, I conclude that it is through the vivid juxtaposition of wild words within the wilderness, that the claims are all the more inspiring and captivating.

For example, not only is Yahweh personally revealed in the wilderness but he proclaims words that will transform the direction and focus of the people. In the dry wilderness, Yahweh speaks words that promise a dislocated slave people a land for themselves (Exod 3:8). Moreover, not any land, but a place that is abundant and sweet, a land that is gushing with milk and honey. These spoken promissory words, completely at odds to where they are located or to any reasonable expectation, are the words Yahweh chooses to speak.

Yahweh also speaks the central foundational Ten Words, upon which Israel's covenant relationship and community-defining law is settled (Exod 20:1-17). These originating words bring order and structure to Israel, in the wild-chaos of the wilderness. This highlights that the law is to be received as dynamic and not static. Yahweh is a God who is deeply involved with Israel and personally interacting with them. Yahweh also speaks in the non-place wilderness that the whole earth belongs to him. The redemptive purposes of Yahweh are not contained to this outpost, but to be

fostered throughout the entire earth. From the dusty chaos of the wilderness, all creation is to be impacted. In this manner, Israel's vocation is expanded to be Yahweh's special treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are weighty words in the wilderness.

Additionally, in the wilderness, words of expected judgement are transformed into mercy and grace (Exod 34:6-7). After the disobedience of the golden calf event, God's attributes of mercy and grace are prioritised and wrath demoted. Yahweh's character is revealed in a free and wild new manner. Whilst seemingly at odds with these visionary grace-filled words, the wilderness actually fosters them, as the isolation and barrenness allows the agenda and echo of Yahweh's words to go forth unimpeded.

Overall, the wilderness is a natural landscape for Yahweh to speak visionary words. First, the silence and isolation of the wilderness allows for all the focus to be purely on these gripping words of Yahweh. Not only to hear the words, but also to imagine the wildest of possibilities. Second, the wilderness promotes the liminality of the experience. Thus, the words that are spoken in-between borders and in-between times ritually foster Israel's identity and transform them. Finally, the landscape of the wilderness—fierce, rugged, barren and arid—allows for the transformative capabilities of Yahweh to be fittingly portrayed.[598] Against the most chaotic backdrop, Yahweh's salvific ability is exhibited. Yahweh, exclusively, is the one who can transform any situation.

[598] See #2.3.7 for more detail on the wilderness within the biblical text being a place of transformative possibility.

In conclusion, there is a complicity with Yahweh's דבר in the מדבר. Yahweh's words of self-revelation and vision resound in the wilderness with a clear relational and salvific agenda. It is, therefore, no surprise that Yahweh chooses to speak in the wilderness. The wilderness fosters these transformative words, allowing them to be heard as well as to echo into the entire earth with wondrous expectation.

# CHAPTER 6: EXPERIENCING YAHWEH IN THE WILDERNESS

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

To underscore the proposal that Yahweh chooses the wilderness as a preferred place to appear, this thesis has considered the role of the landscape, the signs of God and the words of God in four selected wilderness theophanic passages, Exod 3:1-4:17; 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18; and 33:18-34:8. This chapter will continue to build upon these discussions, but from a different perspective. The aim is to now examine the experience of encountering God from the human perspective. This is to test whether part of the reason for why Yahweh chooses to appear within the wilderness is due to how humans respond within a wilderness setting to a theophanic encounter. That is, is there an increased receptivity to supernatural encounters within a wilderness setting? Specifically, I will investigate the experience and engagement of the human characters—Moses, Israel and the elders—with God in the wilderness, to consider how the wilderness setting augments the encounter.

### *6.1.1 Wilderness Encounters: Attentiveness and Transcendence*

The basis for the guiding question for this chapter—does the wilderness setting foster the human experience with Yahweh?—is that in literature; ranging from the spiritual experiences of the church fathers and modern day monks, historical accounts of people's journeys in the wilderness, poetry and fictional voices, religious documents including and beyond monotheism, environmental documentaries, all the way through

to wilderness resource management journals;[599] there is a constant reiteration that the wilderness setting creates a unique place for an encounter with God[600] to occur. The wilderness is viewed as a 'symbolic environment' that 'has become invested with meanings that make it prone to support spiritual interpretation and experience'.[601] With its isolation, *wild*-ness and awe-inducing landscapes, the wilderness landscape engages the human imagination and experiences like no other. While it is not the focus of this thesis to unpack the trajectory of the spiritual experiences in the vast body of literature, what I seek to understand, is whether the chosen theophanic biblical texts reflect a similar expectation that the wilderness environment enhances an experience of Yahweh. Thus, is this a reason for why Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness?

To begin, a working framework of wilderness spiritual experience and encounter is required. This is a difficult undertaking, as the experiences that people have in the wilderness are 'intensely personal and often inexpressible' and consist of 'varied personal meanings of spirituality that make it difficult to define them operationally'.[602] So much so, I would argue that perhaps the biblical prophets and poets are best positioned to capture the vastness of these experiences over the narrators.[603] Even so,

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[599] A search on the term 'wilderness' and 'spirituality' will provide a multitude of results from these different and engaging fields.
[600] Or 'the divine' depending on the perspective of the author.
[601] Roger Kaye, "The Spiritual Dimension of Wilderness: A Secular Approach for Resource Agencies," *International Journal of Wilderness* 12, no. 3 (2006): 6.
[602] Chad P. Dawson and John C. Hendee, *Wilderness Management: Stewardship and Protection of Resources and Values* (Boulder, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2009), 10.
[603] For more on the role of the prophet and poet (which is beyond the scope of this paper) see Brueggemann's works: Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), and Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Also Peterson, summarises the role of poetry well: 'Poetry is language used with intensity. It is not as many suppose, decorative speech. Poets tell us what our eyes, blurred with too much gawking, and our ears dulled with too much chatter, miss around and within us. Poets use words to dray us into depths of reality itself, not by reporting on how life is but by pushing-pulling us into the middle of it. Poetry gets at the heart of existence. Far from being a cosmetic

there are common motifs of (1) heightened awareness and (2) transcendent experience that thread throughout the literature that can be used as a working framework to analyse the appearance of God and experience of the characters in encountering God in our selected Exodus theophanic passages.

#### *6.1.1.1 Heightened Awareness*

First, the wilderness is observed to create a heightened awareness or attentiveness that is necessary for a spiritual event. Studies show that being located in the wilderness attunes a person's perception to sights, sounds and experiences that they would otherwise ignore. This is due to the relative isolation, solitude, and lack of distractions in the wilderness, which creates an environment of quietness as well as receptiveness.[604] In this manner, it is proposed that 'an empty place with no distractions allows our own empty inner places to be opened up to God and filled by him'.[605] The quiet and monotonous setting allows room for a sensitivity and responsiveness to an experience of the supernatural.

Furthermore, attentiveness is required for survival in the wilderness. The landscape is threatening and changeable, requiring utmost alertness. As Lane supports, 'No one lasts in the desert without constant attentiveness to exterior and interior landscapes

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language, it is intestinal. It is root language. Poetry doesn't so much tell us something we never knew, as bring into recognition what was latent or forgotten or overlooked' (Eugene H. Peterson, *Psalms: Prayers of the Heart* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 5–6).

[604] See for example McDonald, Wearing & Ponting's study on 39 participant's experience in the Australian Victorian National Park wilderness setting and their self-description of an increased receptivity and awareness due to being away from the human-made world and pressures (Matthew G. McDonald, Stephen Wearing, and Jess Ponting, "The Nature of Peak Experience in Wilderness," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 37, no. 4 [2009]: 370–385). See also Heintzman's article that summarises wilderness experiences and spirituality research (Paul Heintzman, "The Wilderness Experience and Spirituality: What Recent Research Tells Us," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 74, no. 6 [2003]: 27–32).

[605] Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 321.

alike. One must keep an eye out for landmarks, and position of the sun in the sky, tracks in the sand, threatening clouds. But equally important is staying attuned to one's inner condition'.[606] Thus, the wilderness fosters a sensual awareness both externally and internally, where a person has an increased attentiveness.

Moreover, the landscape in its looming chaos is also unusually beautiful. The aesthetics of the landscape, its barrenness and isolation, alongside its sheer size, danger and magnificence create a zone that entices and engages the senses. 'We enter the wilderness with all our senses and all our being…we know in our elemental core how our journey has entwined us—our comfort and our fate—with this landscape'.[607] As a result, it is the aesthetic wonder of the wilderness[608] that can promote an unusual sense of awareness and encounter with God.

Thus, the wilderness creates heightened attentiveness and an increased sensory awareness, due to its isolated and quiet nature, the alertness required to survive, as well its overwhelming wonder and beauty.

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[606] Belden C. Lane, "Desert Attentiveness, Desert Indifference: Countercultural Spirituality in the Desert Fathers and Mothers," *Cross Currents* 44, no. 2 (June 1, 1994): 195.
[607] Baylor Johnson, "On the Spiritual Benefits of Wilderness," *International Journal of Wilderness* 8, no. 3 (2002): 3.
[608] In McDonald, Wearing and Ponting's research, the aesthetic quality of the wilderness setting was inducive to a 'peak experience'. They draw the conclusion because wilderness settings 'dwarf human beings by their sheer size, ecological complexity, and uniqueness' (McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting, "The Nature of Peak Experience in Wilderness," 376).

*6.1.1.2 Transcendent Experience*

Second, the wilderness environment creates a place for spiritual encounter that many categorise as an experience of transcendence and awe,[609]'wilderness rapture',[610] 'peak experiences'[611] or even 'indifference'.[612] This is the experience where a person is caught up beyond themselves, aware of the 'enduring' nature of the wilderness as well as its 'sublime' characteristics, and their limitations (or indifference) by comparison.[613] Thus, the heightened sensitivity profoundly coalesces to create an opportune environment for an encounter with God, in awe, rapture or transcendence.

Transcendence is defined as 'beyond ordinary limits, beyond the bounds of human experience, connecting with the supernatural. This mystical event often promotes feelings of awe, oneness, harmony and inner peace'.[614] Hence, the wilderness landscape in its barren and rugged place at the margins of society fosters a unique environment that enables transcendent shifts in a person. Distinctively, 'The long, silent contemplation of a vast, indifferent terrain has been shown, throughout human experience, to be a powerful force in subverting self consciousness, pushing the outer edges of language, evoking the deepest desire of the human heart for untamed mystery and beauty'.[615] In this way, there are paradoxical events occurring. The wilderness allows for the abandonment of ego, indifference and relinquishment of self. It challenges physical, emotional as well as 'all the mental constructs in which

[609] Peter Ashley, "Confirming the Spiritual Value of Wilderness," *International Journal of Wilderness* 18, no. 1 (2012): 6–7; Joseph W. Roggenbuck, "Reflections on Endangered Experiences: Returning to Our Roots," *International Journal of Wilderness* 15, no. 3 (2009): 6.
[610] David Cumes, "Thoughts on the Inner Journey in Wilderness," *International Journal of Wilderness* 4, no. 1 (1998): 14–15.
[611] McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting, "The Nature of Peak Experience in Wilderness," 370–385.
[612] Lane, "Desert Attentiveness, Desert Indifference," 195–196.
[613] Johnson, "On the Spiritual Benefits of Wilderness," 29. This concept of transcendence is similar to Otto's discussions of the *numinous* and *mysterium tremendum.* See Otto, *The Idea of Holy*.
[614] Cumes, "Thoughts on the Inner Journey in Wilderness," 15.
[615] Belden C. Lane, "The Sinai Image in the Apophatic Tradition," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1995): 48.

we are tempted to take comfort and pride—thinking we have captured the divine'.[616] But even in these moments of loss, threat and deconstruction, a union with Someone larger and enduring is also occurring. As Leslie van Gelder summarises, 'In the wilderness we come to know our boundaries, know that from wordlessness springs language, from aloneness springs relationship, and from death springs life'.[617] Thus, it is specifically in this arena beyond the normal habitat and patterns of thinking and existing—the fierce wilderness—that an intimate and intensely personal spiritual encounter can occur, which opens up new possibilities.[618]

*6.1.1.3 Awareness & Transcendence: A Framework for Wilderness Experience*

Overall, the wilderness landscape fosters significant spiritual encounters, due to it being an environment that heightens sensory awareness and enables transcendent and awe-inspiring experiences. The task at hand is to evaluate, through this working framework, whether this is similarly seen in the theophanic encounters of Exodus and therefore, a reason why Yahweh chose the wilderness as a primary setting in which to be revealed. Is there heightened sensory awareness in the wilderness? Do the biblical characters have a transcendent or wilderness rapture experience, whereby they are self-forgetting, in awe and/or awakened to a new reality in encountering God?

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[616] Ibid., 68.
[617] Leslie Van Gelder, "At the Confluence of Paradox: Implicit Religion and the Wild," *Implicit Religion* 7, no. 3 (2004): 226.
[618] Further Lane affirms that the wilderness, specifically Mt. Sinai, 'assaults the mind by its lean austerity—is able, even as it deconstructs, to stir the mind to new and imaginative insight' (Lane, "Sinai Image," 60). Hence, even whilst a person can be self-forgetting and lost in the wilderness, a rapturous, transcendent or even miraculous experience is encountered, where they meet with God. Lane would further note, that at Sinai there is a 'limitation of one's perception' but this then 'evoke[s] a new language of exaggeration and excess, revitalising the imagination it had just constricted' (Ibid., 61).

As per the format of the previous chapters, this chapter will examine the experience of Yahweh in the wilderness via these two questions in direct connection to the four different theophanic passages. Once again, the discussion will survey significant aspects of sensory awareness and transcendence in the wilderness encounters and does not aim to be all-inclusive.

## 6.2 EXODUS 3:1-4:17: EXPERIENCE AT THE BURNING BUSH

To discuss the experience of God in the wilderness, I will review Exod 3:1-4:17 in conjunction with the two aspects of a wilderness spiritual encounter: heightened awareness and transcendence. The first part of this section will explore the role the senses have in Exod 3:1-4:17 with a view to understand whether the setting of the wilderness heightens the characters', in this case Moses', sensitivity to perceiving Yahweh's voice and actions. To address this, a discussion of the visual and physical sensory experience of Moses will be explored in two sections, followed by a discussion on Yahweh's sensory experience. Secondly, an investigation of the transcendent aspects of this theophany, through the miraculous signs given to Moses, will be examined.

### 6.2.1 Moses' Visual Sensory Experience: Seeing the Theophany

To begin, I will discuss whether the wilderness fosters a climate for Moses' sense of sight to be heightened in a unique encounter with Yahweh in Exod 3:1-4:17.

First, the verbal root 'to see' (ראה*)* and its cognate nouns are used frequently in Exod 3:1-4:17,[619] so much so that they have been described as 'recurring, like hammer strokes' within the passage.[620] Through the reoccurrence, not only is the importance of the passage underscored, but the reader is also drawn in to 'see' what is occurring.[621] Further, as both Enns and Davies suggest, this repetition occurs to connect the passage to the wider narrative of the book, especially of Exod 2:23-25, where God 'sees', 'hears' and 'knows' the pain of the Israelites, and thus is prompted to act.[622] Therefore, this section will focus on sight and how Yahweh utilises this in the encounter with Moses.

#### *6.2.1.1 The Angel of Yahweh Appeared*

The first instance of the root 'to see' (ראה*)* is in Exod 3:2. This centres the focus of the narrative, as the angel of Yahweh *appeared* to Moses in the deep beyond wilderness. Typically, commentators will note this and turn to concentrate on Moses' reaction to the appearance of God. However, due to it being the first mention of the sensory verb *'to see'*, I do not want to skim over this verse.

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[619] The cognate nouns include 'sight', 'vision', and 'eyes'. See Exod 3:2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 21, 4:1, 5, 14. Although there is repetition, Houtman states that we should not view *r'h* as a 'leitwort' (Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:335).

[620] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1967), 32.

[621] Bernard P. Robinson, "Moses at the Burning Bush," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22, no. 75 (1997): 117.

[622] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 440–441.; Enns, *Exodus*, 95–96; fn. 4. It is also noteworthy that the verb *ra'ah* appears in Exod 2:11. In this verse, Moses 'sees' the beating of the Hebrew, whereas in Exod 2:25 God 'sees' the Israelites and was concerned regarding them. Likewise it is proposed that readers are meant to 'see' a connection between these incidents, recognising that God is in control and bringing about deliverance (See also Ibid., 84–85).

All of the action is initiated in this passage by the messenger who becomes visible, appears, reveals, shows oneself, or is being seen in a flame of fire to Moses.[623] This mysterious 'appearing' of the messenger to Moses directs the text, yet also conveys a tentative, shy or even playful portrayal to the character of God. This is because God appears indirectly, both in a flame and in the outposts of the wilderness setting. Thus, the appearance of God is understated and even partly concealed in the narrative at this point. Although, it could be argued that Yahweh is purposefully appearing in flame in the wilderness, as he trusts that this setting will uniquely heighten the senses of Moses so that God will indeed be seen.

In addition, the revelation of God that is built throughout the passage is subtly grounded in the phrasing of the text where the 'angel of Yahweh appears in a flame'. Rather than a direct and explicit appearance from the start, the revelation of God is cautiously unravelled throughout this passage from his first appearance. This is due to the characterisation of God being described from an 'angel in a flame', 'God', 'God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob', to the climatic revelation of 'Yahweh'.[624] The sensory perception that occurs in this passage is continuously sharpened and refined as the characters 'see' and 'hear' one another.

Furthermore, as Fretheim notes, 'Appearance makes a difference to words. For God to assume the form of a messenger renders the personal element in the divine address more apparent'.[625] Therefore, it is from this personal appearance, that the disclosure

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[623] The *Niphal* stem is used to convey this.
[624] 'Although it is clear as the text unravels that the angel of Yahweh and God are one and the same' (Young, "Call of Moses, Part II," 3–5).
[625] Fretheim continues to state, 'Such "visible words" affirm that the word of God is not simply for minds and spirits. Moses' response could not be simply to believe or to speak. Moses is also called to act …' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 55).

and revelation of Yahweh and his words will originate in this encounter. It is pertinent that Yahweh chose the setting of the wilderness to do so. Nonetheless, at this point in the text it is not completely obvious 'who' has appeared and they are yet to speak. Thus, suspense and tension is created in the plot (albeit briefly) as to whether Moses will 'see' beyond the non-consuming flames of the bush.

#### *6.2.1.2 Moses Looked and Beheld*

Without hesitation, the text answers that Moses '*looked'* and '*beheld'* the bush that burned with fire (3:2) and consequently, the one who appeared. Moses' attention is caught in this wilderness space as he '*looks'* (ראה*)* at this sight. However, what Moses sees is different to what the reader has seen. As Davies translates 'Moses was looking around and noticed the bush' (v2b).[626] This action captures the general 'looking' action that any normal shepherd would be doing to guard their sheep from dangers or find new grazing patches. Moses, in the role of shepherd, looked and saw the bush burning. However, the reader has been privy to seeing 'a flame of fire from the midst of a bush that was not consuming it (v2a)'.[627] Therefore, although Moses has looked, his vision remains uncertain as to what he is encountering. Moses is not yet aware that 'in the midst' God is present. Even so, the particle '*behold'* draws us in to Moses' experience, and underlines his attentive inquisitiveness and heightened senses.

#### *6.2.1.3 Moses Sees a Great Sight*

To continue, in verse 3, knowledge of Moses' internal dialogue is given and the *beholding* of the bush transitions into action. Moses has *seen* that this bush is unusual,

[626] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 440.
[627] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 54.

and he must turn aside, 'now',[628] to *see* it up close (the third time ראה is used).[629] Moses' internal dialogue shows 'more than a casual indication of curiosity, but suggests his growing awareness that something truly unique is present here'.[630] As a result, this is expressed through Moses' desire to 'see' this *'great sight'* (מראה).[631] That is, the bush that is continuously burning without charring is a 'mysterious phenomenon'[632] or 'great sight'.

Hence, in the progression of the narrative there are:

> … two depths or intensities of seeing: the one is general ("he was looking ahead or around") and has the sense of indeterminate seeing, denoting a field of vision. The second use of the root however is determinate seeing, for now something specific, this strange bush, fills Moses' visual horizon. The text suggests that he has left the path and is now focusing his attention upon it.[633]

Moses, therefore, displays increased and focused seeing or heightened sensitivity in the wilderness, even though he is oblivious to the significance of the moment and its transcendent nature; or even that this 'great sight' is a precursor of the 'great sights' that Israel will see in Egypt where God will equally use creation contrary to its norm, as well as the 'sight' of the glory of God like fire at the top of Mount Sinai (see Exod 24:17). Moses is displaying intensified attentiveness to the encounter, which will lead to increased spiritual insight.

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[628] A particle of entreaty is used here to emphasise the action of Moses.
[629] Savran summarises that initially Moses sees a bush on fire. Potentially this was thought to be of natural causes, for example a bush caught alight by lightning. However, this is discounted, as Moses then sees that the bush is on fire, but not being consumed. The third stage of perception is that Moses then turns aside to see the great sight. (See Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 98).
[630] Ibid.
[631] Or alternatively translated as Moses seeing this 'great' (*ESV, RSV, JPS*), 'amazing' (*CJB*) or 'strange sight' (*NIV*).
[632] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 47; see also Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:109.
[633] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 440.

Furthermore, in this account Moses is portrayed as drawing closer and leaning in to deliberately see with heightened perception in this wilderness space. It is this curiosity and intentionality to 'see' that Fretheim proposes is what God utilises in calling Moses, and the wilderness setting ideally enables this to occur.[634] Thus, it is no accident that Yahweh chose the wilderness to be revealed.

#### *6.2.1.4 Yahweh Sees Moses Seeing*

Suitably, the subject changes as the narrative continues and it is now Yahweh who sees (v4). Yahweh is portrayed as waiting poised to see how Moses would respond in the wilderness; will he or will he not see?[635] Yahweh *sees* (ראה) that Moses had turned aside to *see* (ראה). When Yahweh 'sees' that Moses has turned aside, he reciprocates by calling out to him from the midst of the bush. In this manner, there is interplay between Moses' actions and God's in this passage; 'Moses the discoverer of God' becomes the 'discovered by God'.[636] As Moses turns to see the great sight, God turns to see him. Thus, equally it seems that God's senses are heightened in this encounter in the wilderness.

Further, it is this interplay between Moses and Yahweh that Davies suggests is a 'precondition' within the passage that invites 'God's speaking and eventual self-naming';[637] for from Moses' investigation of the great sight, engagement is fostered. Similarly, Fretheim comments, 'Moses allows himself to be drawn into the sphere of

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[634] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 54.
[635] What must not be forgotten is that feasibly Moses may not have seen. This is implied in the text and will be discussed later in this section.
[636] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 72.
[637] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 445. Interestingly, Davies continues to highlight that there may be echoes of the 'wisdom tradition with its emphasis upon studied engagement with the world's complexities as sign of divine authorship' (Ibid).

the unusual sight that communication takes place. The narrator, in turn, refines the nature of the sight for the reader; the messenger is now called Yahweh and God'.[638] Hence, an exploratory interplay is illustrated between Yahweh *appearing*, Moses *seeing* a *great sight*, and Yahweh *seeing* Moses. Through discussing the sensory verb of sight in the wilderness, the tentative relationship beginnings of Yahweh and Moses are viewed through a unique lens. Especially as Moses unexpectedly *sees* with heightened perception and is *seen* in the wilderness. Subsequently, a new platform of God and Moses' relationship is initiated.

The interaction between God and Moses is tentative and fragile though, for very easily Moses could have discounted the bush as illusionary. The passage does imply that if Moses had not engaged a heightened sensitivity and turned aside to see, the encounter would have evaporated 'in a puff of smoke'. If not for Moses' perceptiveness, curiosity and drawing near, Yahweh may not have responded. Savran contemplates this and states:

> Given that the Bible is adamant about YHWH's freedom to respond (or not to respond) according to his own intentions, the linking of YHWH's speech to Moses' turning aside points out another exceptional aspect of this theophany. For all the careful planning evident in the narrative construction of Moses' origins and identity, there is a profound sense of tentativeness about this encounter. The text contains the possibility that Moses could notice the bush and decide *not* to turn aside. Moses' movement from the second to the third stage as outlined above is crucial to YHWH's decision to address him, and to the movement of the story of his call and Israel's redemption from Egypt. It could be argued that YHWH is testing Moses' obedience here, but I think it has much more to do with how the recipient of revelation moves beyond an everyday perception of reality to a readiness for an encounter with the divine.[639]

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[638] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 54; see also Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 441. In the text, Kaiser specifically notes that God *appears* as 'Yahweh', as detailed from the narrator's point of view, but from Moses' point of view, he is *seeing* 'God' (Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 363).

[639] Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 99–100. Savran also states, 'There is not, to my knowledge, an equivalent passage in the Bible in which YHWH's verbal response in theophany is conditioned by a human response. In all other cases YHWH's response is portrayed as unequivocal…. In Exod 3:2

Savran has summarised the text carefully and his conclusion that the recipient moves 'beyond an everyday perception of reality to a readiness' well supports the thesis of this paper. Expressly, as per the framework of this chapter, I would conclude that the ambiguity of the wilderness landscape enabled Moses to move beyond the everyday, to foster an expectation for the unusual and deeper spiritual insight. The nature of the wilderness amplified his senses, which created a unique readiness and sensitivity. It allowed for a freedom of action and response for both characters, as norms are relaxed in the wilderness setting. Therefore, as Moses moved further beyond the margins of his known circles of civilisation, into the dust, beauty and danger of the wilderness, he was positioned for an encounter with the holy. Consequently, Yahweh used the properties of the wilderness setting—heightened sensitivity and transcendence—to uniquely be revealed.

#### *6.2.1.5 Moses Hides and Does Not See*

As a consequence of God seeing Moses turn aside, God calls out to Moses, declaring his identity as the God of his fathers. This results in the final *seeing* linked to Moses. That is, Moses' not 'looking' at God. In response to God speaking and informing Moses of his identity, 'Moses hides his face for he was afraid to look (נבט, *nābaṭ*, literally 'stare' or 'gaze') at God' (3:6). This is remarkable. The sensory verbs regarding sight have intensified in the narrative, yet the sensory climax becomes Moses' not *looking.*

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YHWH makes an initial visual overture, and waits for Moses' response. However in Exod 3 the situation is all the more surprising in that YHWH's speech in 3:4 is described as entirely contingent upon Moses' actions. The use of a relative clause ('When YHWH saw …') implies clearly that had Moses not turned aside, YHWH would not necessarily have spoken' (Ibid.).

While it is common for God's face to be hidden in scripture, it is very unusual for a person to hide their face. In fact Hamilton notes that within the Bible, 'Exod 3:6 is the only reference to a person hiding (with the verb *sātar*) his face from God'.[640] Hamilton makes no commentary as to why this is or its significance. However, I suggest it once again underscores the significance and transcendence of the event. Moses recognises whom he is seeing, God, his father's God, whom has not forsaken them. Moses is overwhelmed by awe and fear, as he finally realises who is in the midst of the bush. So much so, he does not want to be caught 'gawking'[641] and restrains himself by hiding his face. Moses through progressively heightened senses, perceives the transcendence of the encounter at the bush; the uncontainable and holy God has appeared.

Moses' hiding of the face creates a pivotal transition in the passage. As once Moses hides his face, the bush, flames or any other unusual *sights* are no longer mentioned. Instead, the sights are replaced with the voice of Yahweh. In fact, as Moses' gaze was averted, it was then that the voice of God spoke. This suggests that the voice of God takes precedence over all sight impulses.[642] Savran concurs, observing that this is a normal complementary pattern in theophanic encounters. Wherein, seeing typically precedes hearing as the introductory inviting element, but the biblical position of hearing is renowned as 'the primary mode of perceiving the divine'.[643]

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[640] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 50.
[641] נבט can mean "gaze," almost "gawk" (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:28).
[642] It is interesting to compare Moses' reaction to the bush with the thunder, lightning, trumpet sounds and smoke at Mt Sinai. Moses draws near, averts his gaze but keeps hearing, yet the people stepped back and declined to hear God directly (see Exod 20:18).
[643] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 326. This perspective reflects the centrality of the Sinai theophany that emphasises hearing the Ten Words of God plus overcomes any tendency towards idolatry.

Thus, in regards to Exod 3:1-4:17, the reason for the visual sign of the bush is to 'excite Moses' curiosity' so that he is led to encounter Yahweh.[644] As a result, the reader should not be blinded by the fiery bush but recognise that 'the fire serves only to attract the attention of the candidate, or perhaps better, the attention of the audience to the story. The divine speech is the more important part of the pericope'.[645] This emphasis is promoted in the text, as there is an intensification of sensory movement 'from a general visual field, to a specific attentive act of focused seeing, then to speech and hearing'.[646] Hence, the focus of chapter five on the message of what was spoken. What is important for this chapter is that there is heightened perception occurring in the wilderness both visually and aurally.[647] Moreover, Yahweh uses the wilderness setting purposefully to reveal himself, his words and encounter Moses.

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[644] Ibid., 325.

[645] George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 57–58. Similarly, Beach-Verhy comments 'Human beings are naturally both awed by and afraid of fire. Moses was drawn to see how the bush could be ablaze and yet not burn up. And, once God had his attention, God began to speak' (Beach-Verhey, "Exodus 3," 181).

[646] Davies, "Reading the Burning Bush," 441. Or according to the midrash there is a similar progression and focus occurring in the passage, as God has shown 'Moses the bush, and then the light, and then the glow of the angel, and then the presence of God. And only at that point did He call to him from the bush' (Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," 28).

[647] Finally, sight in the passage is not just confined to Moses and God. It will extend out to others as well. First, the passage observes that the Egyptians will 'see'. We note that God tells Moses that Israel will have 'favour in the eyes' of the Egyptians so that when they leave Egypt they will not be empty-handed (3:21). So what has been spoken and perceived privately in the wilderness will be on display in Egypt. The great wonders will be performed in Egypt, so that they will be released. The repetition of the *sight* theme here is noticeable, for not only does God *see* Moses and Moses *see* God, but Egypt will also *see* that Yahweh is with the Hebrews. Furthermore, as the encounter comes to a conclusion, we observe Aaron being drawn into the experience too (4:14-16; 27-28). For Yahweh tells Moses that Aaron will meet with Moses, and his heart will be glad when he *sees* him. So it is inferred that Aaron will *see* that something is different in Moses, more than just the recognition of his brother. Something has changed Moses. So much so that Aaron's heart will be glad. Further, he will then speak the words that Moses speaks to him. Implicitly, Aaron will *hear* and then *speak*, because he has been 'with' Moses, just as God is with or in the 'midst' of Moses. This meeting interestingly occurs in the desert. Aaron is drawn out to where Moses (and God) is, to receive the words and commission that Moses has gained. This occurs out of the sight of Egypt in a formless, yet liminal, place. Yet like the creation story of Gen 1, from the formless place a new start is being inaugurated for the people of Israel.

#### *6.2.1.6 Summary*

In summary, Moses' visual senses are heightened and engaged in this wilderness encounter with Yahweh. Indeed, Yahweh uses the wilderness setting to appear to Moses as an angel of Yahweh in the dramatic sign of the burning bush. In response to this dramatic sign, Moses' sense of sight and spiritual insight is acutely activated as he looks, sees, and beholds a great sight. This displays an increased perception and attentiveness, beyond that of a normal shepherd. Moses' visual sense is clearly attuned in the wilderness. Consequently, Yahweh equally 'sees' and engages Moses via speech. Although, it is at this point that the narrative changes and Moses refrains from seeing or gawking at Yahweh directly. Instead, the priority focuses on the words of Yahweh.

### 6.2.2 Moses' Physical Sensory Experience: Touching the Theophany

Secondly, to continue the exploration of heightened senses in the wilderness, I will consider an aspect of Moses' physical engagement in his encounter with Yahweh. That is, his bare feet. Moses at the burning bush was instructed by God to 'put off your sandals from off your feet' (3:5). Through this action, a connection of Moses' physical senses both to Yahweh himself, as well as in relation to his external environment, was formed. It is the significance of the sensory experience of the feet being bare within the wilderness theophanic encounter that will be explored.

#### *6.2.2.1 Shoes and Honour*

Typically, the removal of shoes is a sign symbolising reverence and honour as per the customs of the ancient Near Eastern culture, where one removes their shoes before

entering a house, dwelling or temple.[648] Thus, Moses, upon hearing the voice of God calling him and instructing him not to draw any closer, is invited to show reverence and honour to God as the superior authority. This action though, of removing his shoes, was not intuitive to Moses at the time, for he has to be told to remove his shoes.[649] Thus, the unexpected nature of the encounter is highlighted through this specific direction. Moses is unaware of where he is and whom he was conversing with. Yet, the instruction to remove his sandals 'stresses the fact that the story has to do with encounter with the divine numen, an encounter which makes of every spot where God intervenes a sanctuary.'[650] Thus, in an apparently natural event of shepherding sheep in the wilderness, God utilises the senses and permeates the event with super-natural occurrences.

#### *6.2.2.2 Groundedness*

In relation to the request to remove the sandals due to the holy ground, I would suggest that the text is making a comment regarding the physicality of 'groundedness'.[651] That is, not only was Moses' sense of sight and sound amplified in the encounter with God, but at the bush with shoes off Moses is being intensely exposed to the roughness of the wilderness dirt beneath his feet. He is being grounded; connected to the ground in all its grittiness, dustiness, and other-ness. As an embodied person God is engaging with him in a heightened multi-sensory manner

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[648] Enns, *Exodus*, 98. Cole specifically notes that there are two origins for this sign of reverence. 'First, it may be a sign of acceptance of a servant's position, for a slave usually went barefoot (Lk 15:22). Secondly, it may be a relic of very early days when men laid aside all covering and pretence to approach their god. Hence early Sumerian priests performed their duties naked, although the Israelite priest always wore a linen kilt' (Cole, *Exodus*, 65).
[649] This is similar to other theophanic encounters, see Josh 5:15 for example.
[650] Robinson, "Moses at the Burning Bush," 113.
[651] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009). See especially Chapter 4 'The Practice of Walking on the Earth: Groundedness' which inspired the thoughts in this section.

through sight, sound and touch.[652] Lane would affirm this position indicating that 'touching the earth, therefore, becomes a way of entering more fully the deeper mystery of ourselves and of God'.[653] Moses, therefore, is being swept up in this wild-place—to see, hear and feel himself and God—like in no other place. The removal of his shoes in the wilderness space (instead of the typical cultic phrase 'to draw near'[654]) alerts Moses to the transcendence of the moment and creates an atmosphere of curiosity and groundedness, which uniquely invites a holy response from Moses to Yahweh God.

#### *6.2.2.3 Embodied Encounter*

Indeed, the physical involvement of Moses responding to God is emphasised in this passage. We note that Moses engages through the actions of, 'Take off your shoes … throw down the rod … put out your hand and catch the snake by its tail … put your hand within your robe … I will be with your mouth' (Exod 3:5; 4:3-4; 4:6-7; 4:12). Through all these actions, God is inviting Moses to respond and interact, not only in perception and speech, but also with his body. Moses is encountering God in all his senses and physicality. It is proposed that it is the atmosphere of the wilderness made holy—raw, rugged, silent and fresh—that allows this experience to occur in a multi-sensory way. Moses' senses are heightened in the wilderness and even more so

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[652] John F. Kavanaugh states, 'We experience our bodies as limits, but at the same time they are opportunities to be real and engaged in the world. Our bodies are our self-revelation to the world; but they often conceal our full reality' (John F. Kavanaugh, "Our Alien Bodies," *America* 206, no. 14 [April 30, 2012]: 10). See also for more insights, Darrel Cox, "The Physical Body in Spiritual Formation: What God Has Joined Together Let No One Put Asunder," *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 281–291.
[653] Belden C. Lane, "The Mountain That Was God," *Christian Century* 102, no. 20 (1985): 580.
[654] John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 63.

through the specific instructions of Yahweh, which ground and attune him to this profound encounter.

In fact, it is interesting to explore the progression and involvement of Moses' body throughout the passage. First, he draws near to the awesome sight to investigate in curiosity. He hears God's voice asking him to remove his shoes (3:5). He does so, hiding his face as he recognises that it is God who is speaking to him (3:6). At this point, even though Moses has withdrawn from the visual aspect of this encounter, he can still hear, smell and feel all that is going on.[655] As the encounter continues Moses unravels his body, for he is asked what is in his hand (4:2). He then actively casts the rod down to the ground and picks it up again (4:3-4). He similarly is instructed to put his hand in and out of his cloak (4:6-7). Finally, God says to him that he is with his mouth (4:12). In a variety of ways, God utilises Moses' body and actions—head to toe—in this encounter. Hence, as Fretheim observes, 'Because the whole person is caught up in the encounter, the word that is spoken may also prove to be more convincing. Moreover, the intensity of the relationship between the speaker and addressee is heightened when bodily presence is involved'.[656] Overall, this encounter is a fierce dramatic-dialogue where Moses is engaged and converted in all his senses with Yahweh. The revelation of his destiny and the future of the people of Israel is both revealed and enacted, with even the creative order participating. To me, the simple action of removing his shoes highlights the physicality of Moses' engagement with Yahweh in the wilderness.

[655] This is unlike Israel, who did not want to see, hear or feel as indicated by their drawing back later in the Sinai account.
[656] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 86.

#### *6.2.2.4 Creational Echoes*

But finally, why this embodied encounter? I would suggest that beyond the heightening of the senses in the wilderness, there is a larger creational echo being fashioned. Moses, the new creational partner (אדם) is in a place imbued with the presence of God and the burning bush (also known as 'tree'). In addition, he is being connected back to the אדמה his earthy origins, through this action of removing his shoes. That is, he is being asked to stand without barrier and without interference in this אדמה wilderness-space. Further, he is being asked to remove the trappings of the Egyptian and Midianite cultures that he has so far belonged to. He is also removing any symbolism of sacrifice, as most sandals were made from animal hides. Thus, nothing human-made and nothing unclean was to come between Moses' feet and God's holy presence.[657] He is bare and open, without artifice before Yahweh, here in the back of the wilderness; the uncreated. I think this is significant, as it is in the stripped backed place of the wilderness, that Moses is being asked to strip back and not only reconnect with the אדמה but also the fuller creational plan God has for him.

Furthermore, it is whilst being connected to the dusty earth that God calls Moses and informs him what is central to it all. That is, Moses is to deliver and liberate and bring a people 'to serve' the Lord back on this mountain. The command 'to serve' was an original command in the garden (Gen 2:15), and it is to this action that God once again calls his people.[658] They will be re-created through the events of the exodus. But

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[657] 'So it is probable that being told to take off their sandals was not because of demanded respect, and certainly not worship on their part because they had been told to do it, but because nothing man-made—and therefore unclean—was to be between the feet of God's creature and the holiness that God's presence made the ground' (James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* [North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998], 102).

[658] The command 'to serve and guard' (Gen 2:15) is particularly echoed later within the Pentateuch narrative as a priestly activity within the tabernacle (see Num 3:7-8). But the phrase 'to serve' God is

the impetus for this re-creation comes from the very place that appears to be uncreated—the wilderness. Thus, Moses is being grounded and established in the dust of the wilderness; both in his identity, but also on behalf of the people of Israel that he is about the lead out and away from their dominators. As a result, where previously a tree and its fruit became the ruin of creational wellbeing, a bush in a wild place is being used to reverse these effects and bring healing to the people of God.

#### *6.2.2.5 Summary*

In summary, Moses is touching the theophany via the removal of his shoes. Not only does this attune Moses to the holiness of the space and the one who is engaging with him, but also speaks to being grounded in a multi-sensory encounter; an embodied encounter. Finally, this action of shoes being removed alludes to the restoration of creational purposes as Moses is positioned as the new אדם in relation to the אדמה.

### 6.2.3 Yahweh's Sensory Experience

In exploring the senses in the wilderness in Exod 3:1-4:17, this final discussion will turn to examine the sensory experience of Yahweh in the wilderness. It will especially note the effect, if any, of the wilderness setting upon Yahweh's engagement with Moses in this environment.

In Exod 3:7, after Moses hides his face, there is a clear transition from Moses to God as the subject of the verbs. Moses has done the majority of *sensing* to this point (3:2-6). Now, with Moses not-looking (3:6), the references transition to the senses of God,

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recounted over and over as the impetus for the exodus event (see Exod 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1; 9:13; 10:3, 7, 8, 24, 26; 12:31).

which include his 'seeing' as well as to other perception verb.[659] This section will explore this by discussing Yahweh's (1) heightened awareness and (2) awareness beyond geographical boundaries.

#### *6.2.3.1 Heightened Awareness*

Chiefly, the text denotes God's heightened awareness, for God has 'indeed seen' the affliction of his people in Egypt (3:7, 9). Furthermore, God is portrayed as 'hearing' the cries (3:7, 9) and 'knowing' the pain of the Israelites (3:7). In this way, God's sensory experience is much broader than that of Moses. Indeed, these verbs adeptly echo the narrator's agenda of Exod 2:23-25, where God previously 'heard', 'remembered', 'saw the people of Israel' and 'knew'. The difference being that now God has appeared and via his direct speech (3:7-10), his sensory experience is firsthand. Subsequently, it is clear that he is going to act in response.[660]

The first of these verbs in Exod 3:7, 'seen', is put in the Hebrew infinitive absolute form.[661] This translates to 'I have carefully watched' or 'I have paid very close attention to' and therefore, indicates 'the intensity of God's interest in the misery of his people'.[662] God's seeing is portrayed as amplified here in the wilderness. Further, God has seen the affliction of 'My people' (3:7) not the phrase 'the sons of Israel' (2:25), which strengthens the intimacy of relationship God has towards Israel. Moreover, God not only sees, but also hears their cries. These cries of anguish and pain have not gone unheard or unnoticed. Finally, God 'knows' their sufferings. The

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[659] As Carroll states, 'With Moses hiding his face, the god (*sic.*) does the seeing for him' (Carroll, "Strange Fire," 44.)
[660] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 59.
[661] The Hebrew infinite absolute form intensifies the verb (Ibid., 60).
[662] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:117.

verb ‘to know’ (3:7) portrays the intimacy of relationship God has with the people of Israel. Specifically, ‘For God to “know” the pain of Israel’s suffering means for God to respond to it in his own essential way. The oppression becomes his own’.[663] This specific knowing is especially detailed in Exod 3:7, as God knows their ‘sufferings’. Whereas previously in 2:25, God just ‘knew’ with no specific object mentioned. In this wilderness encounter, the action of God, entering into and experiencing the suffering of Israel, is emphasised. Notably, the fourth verb in 2:25 ‘to remember’ is not present in Exod 3. It would be expected to parallel the other verbs to see, hear and know. Yet, by its omission the narrator advances the action[664] as God is now resolute and will act, ‘coming down to deliver them out’ and to ‘bring Israel up’ into a good land (3:8, 10).[665] Therefore, in this wilderness encounter, God is portrayed as having heightened sensory perception.

#### *6.2.3.2 Awareness Beyond Boundaries*

Similarly, within this account, Yahweh’s perception is heightened beyond that of Moses and the previous narration, as God ‘sees’, ‘hears’ and ‘knows’ more intently than before. There is a multi-valency in God’s sensory experience. Moreover, God’s sensory perception extends beyond the current geographical boundaries of the wilderness, for there is awareness of what is occurring in Egypt. Unlike Moses, who

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[663] Coats, *Moses*, 58. Coats also states, ‘In their relationship God makes a personal commitment of his most basic nature. It is, therefore, a relationship that involved not only shared experience—God shares the pain of Israel’s suffering—but a trust developed from the shared experience that affects all future events in the relationship’ (Ibid.). Similarly, Fretheim states, ‘God is here depicted as one who is intimately involved in the sufferings of the people. God has so entered into their sufferings as to have deeply felt what they are having to endure. … God is internally related to the suffering, entering fully into the oppressive situation and making it God’s own’ (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 60).

[664] Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” 712.

[665] The purpose of God is described as ‘bringing out’ as well as ‘bringing up’. In the case of ‘bringing out’ (*yāṣā*ʾ), the meaning is ‘to go free, be released’. Whereas in the case of ‘bringing up’ (*ālâ)*, the focus is ‘not on liberation but on settlement in the new land … the Hiphil of *yāṣā*ʾ is used more for the exodus event (83x) than is the Hiphil of *ālâ* (41x). Taking both verbs together, one sees that God’s saving/delivering work is both a saving “from” and a saving “to”’ (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 55).

is removed from the pain of Egypt, God is cognisant of it.[666] As a result of the heightened perception, Yahweh proposes to 'come down to deliver them' (3:8). Therefore, it is noteworthy that God *sees* clearly both in and out of the wilderness. However, I would conclude that God uses the wilderness setting to enable Moses to *see, hear* and *know* beyond his own sphere to something much greater; a God called Yahweh, a freed people and a land of their own.

#### *6.2.3.3 Summary*

In review, Yahweh's senses are portrayed as amplified and multivalent within the wilderness setting. In comparison to Moses, there is a greater depth of sensation and response experienced. Indeed, Yahweh's sensory awareness is intensified in the wilderness, as noted by his direct speech, the engagement with the suffering of the people and the intimacy that is portrayed. As such, Yahweh is illustrated as being responsiveness to what he has perceived and acts to bring relief. All in all, whilst Yahweh's sensory awareness is not limited to the wilderness sphere, it is considerably heightened in this space and influential in the encounter with Moses.

### 6.2.4 Signs to Moses: Snakes, Leprosy and Dry Land

Finally, in the Exod 3:1-4:17 encounter with Yahweh, beyond the unique words that are spoken and the heightened sensory awareness, the wilderness enables Moses to experience the transcendent and miraculous. There are many aspects in this encounter that could be examined in reference to transcendence (and some of these have been intermingled in the previous sections). However, I will focus on the three marvellous

[666] Carroll, "Strange Fire," 44.

signs that God gives to Moses to confirm his role and in response to Moses' third objection, 'But behold, they will not believe me or hear my voice' (Exod 4:1). These are the signs of the (1) rod turning into a snake, (2) hand becoming leprous and (3) water turning to blood. These signs will be explored in reference to the unique role that the wilderness setting plays in evoking a transcendent encounter with Yahweh.

#### *6.2.4.1 Sign #1: Rod to Snake*

The first sign that God provides to reassure Moses that the people will listen to him is in regards to his rod. Moses is instructed to cast his shepherd rod to the ground (Exod 4:1-5). The rod in itself is just the ordinary tool of a shepherd used for guiding and corralling the sheep plus providing support over difficult terrain. However, God takes this ordinary symbol and transforms it into something else altogether, a snake. Such a shocking change, that Moses flees. Primarily, I aim to draw out the interplay between the setting of wilderness with the transcendent images of snakes, dust and wood within this encounter.

##### *6.2.4.1.1 Snakes, Dust and Wood*

The most obvious connection to the transcendence of the encounter and the wilderness in the first sign is the rod's transformation into a snake. As a wilderness sign, this is not so surprising, for snakes within the ANE and ancient Israel are viewed as the residents of 'the great and terrible wilderness'. For example, Deut 8:15 highlights that the wilderness is the place that is inhabited by the נחש (snake) and שרף (fiery serpent) plus many other wild animals. Humans typically fear wild animals, and the further away from civilised and cultivated land, the wilder and more fearful the

animals are portrayed to be.[667] Snakes are typical of this. Further, snakes due to their poisonous nature are feared, which is highlighted in Moses' actions of running from the snake. Subsequently, the synonym שרף 'fiery' may have developed due to the fiery bite a snake can cause.[668] Overall, whilst a snake is at home in the wilderness, the use of a fiery wild creature in this holy encounter with Yahweh is what is very distinctive.

Further, the transcendent moment is marked all the more by fear and risk that this sign brings. Moses experienced fear when God instructs him to pick up the snake by the tail. This is an action that is fraught with danger, as normally one picks up a snake by the head to control the direction of its fangs and bite. The text acknowledges Moses' hesitancy in picking up the snake. 'When God told him to take the serpent by the tail, he used a word that means to "take hold of" [חזא] something firmly. But when the Bible describes what Moses actually did, it uses the word that means "to snatch at" or "to grab cautiously" [חזק]'.[669] This risky and unexpected sign is highly unusual and Moses' reaction to it, very reasonable. Therefore, the wilderness landscape aptly harnesses the elements of fear, risk and wild-ness and fosters similar responses in Moses as he experiences Yahweh. In this way, it appears Yahweh uses the wilderness to his purposes.

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[667] See also #2.3.3. Gene M. Tucker, "Rain on a Land Where No One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 1 (1997): 11.

[668] To continue examining the theme of snake and wilderness, it is observed that later in Israel's wilderness wanderings (Num 21:4-9) the people will complain and God will send fiery serpents among them. However, when they look upon the נחש on a pole set in the wilderness they will be healed. It is suggested that the root meaning of שרף means 'to burn'. Is it relevant that the snake Moses encounters turns into a נחש and not a שרף? And could this be, as he is in the presence of the *burning bush?* I find it interesting that the images that the words in these two passages foster in the imaginations of the reader are interrelated; bush, rods, burning, snakes, and wilderness. That is, the two situations have a rod or a pole, they are in the wilderness, they each have a reference to fire (either the bush or the fiery snake), and there are snakes involved. This is intriguing, and warrants further intertextual reflection.

[669] Ryken, *Exodus*, 109. See also Durham, *Exodus*, 3:45.

Furthermore, the image of a snake within the ANE is a flexible and complex metaphor that can be both positive and negative. A snake can represent aspects of life, fertility, wisdom, chaos and death.[670] These various images can be viewed even in Gen 3:14, where the נחש first appears. Additionally, Ryken highlights that the 'snake was a symbol of Egyptian power, for the Egyptians worshipped the serpent as a source of wisdom and healing'.[671] As such, some will place Pharaoh in the role of 'the snake' especially as he is the ruler of Egypt, and even connect this with the cobra or uraeus worn on the headdress of the Pharaoh.[672] Through this sign, God was showing Moses that Yahweh had power over life, death, wisdom and all the gods of Egypt by turning the rod into a snake and back again; even out here in the wilderness. Overall, I would argue that the setting of the wilderness and the snake sign once again captures the density and ambivalence of the nature of Yahweh. The wilderness and this sign is complex and can be imaged both negatively and positively within the biblical text.

When taking into account the wilderness and the dangerous situation that Moses is in, maybe it is not that surprising that the rod turns into a snake; as both the shape of the rod, the wilderness location and the Egyptian background seem to foster this snake-sign. Moreover, the 'wood' so far in this passage has responded supernaturally, that is the bush is burned but not consumed.[673] The wood of the rod is also involved and responds supernaturally, by changing into a snake and back again. Later in this Exodus narrative, the staff will symbolise God's authority. Thus, it is significant to

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[670] Elaine A. Phillips, "Serpent Intertexts: Tantalizing Twists in the Tales," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 238.
[671] Ryken, *Exodus*, 110.
[672] George Savran, "Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 64 (1994): 54; See also Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 376.
[673] For an interesting article on the motif of water-wood-mountain triad and how it shapes the Exodus tradition, see Frank H. Polak, "Water, Rock, and Wood: Structure and Thought Pattern in the Exodus Narrative," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 25 (1997): 19–42.

see that the ‘roots’ of God’s authority via Moses are grounded in a wilderness landscape with a wily snake and woody image. In this way, the ambiguity, mystical and wild-ness of God is astonishing in the encounter.

Biblically, the initial picture of the snake is a crafty creature that becomes a cursed animal that eats dust. That is, an unclean and humiliated creature. Therefore, it is not surprising that this cursed animal appears in the wilderness. What is unusual in Exod 3:1-4:17 though, is that God has just indicated that the specific place is ‘holy ground’. Thus, the picture created is multifaceted. Wilderness land, due to its un-productivity is viewed under a curse, so a snake appearing in this setting is not unusual (Gen 3:14; 18-19). But what is surprising is that God has deemed this wilderness land ‘holy’ and subsequently, turned a rod into a cursed snake in the holy wilderness. God utilises the wilderness setting to foster an awe-inducing and transcendent encounter with Moses, where the norms are held in abeyance. God is not confined to any so-called-norms. In fact, it could even be concluded that Yahweh acts as wily and craftily as the rod-snake. This, therefore, marks a profound and transcendent moment for Moses.

*6.2.4.1.2 Summary*

In summary, the sign of the rod changing to a snake highlights the miraculous and awe-inspiring nature of Moses’ encounter with God. Not only is this a miraculous sign in the wilderness, but the snake image is also a sign that connects with the wilderness setting due to it being a snake’s natural habitat. Even so, the snake image does introduce a complexity in its interpretation, due to its multivalency.

### *6.2.4.2 Sign #3: Dry Land*

In examining the signs to Moses, I will move ahead to discuss the third sign before returning to the second sign, as its connection to the overarching theme of wilderness is most obvious. Expressly, this is because Moses is instructed by Yahweh to pour water on the 'dry land' (יבשה or יבשת) (Exod 4:9). In fact, the refrain 'dry land' is used twice, as Moses is told to pour water from the river out on the *dry land* and subsequently, the sign will be the water becoming blood upon the *dry land.* Within the narrative, I suggest there is an emphasis and connection between similar key phrases and images; dry land, Horeb and wilderness. This will be briefly explored in this section, especially through a geographical-wilderness lens and how it influences a transcendent experience with Yahweh

#### *6.2.4.2.1 Dry Land*

First, in noting the definition of dry land, the root term (יבש*)* refers to the dryness or withering that occurs because of the absence of normal fluids and moisture.[674] However, יבשה specifically highlights the distinction between large bodies of water and dry land within scripture.[675] The root יבש is also like its synonym חרב, with these terms being found interchangeably. This is significant, as previously noted in #3.2.2 the proper noun Horeb is derived from this term חרב.

[674] Ralph H. Alexander, "Yābēš," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 360.
[675] This term is used in the creation account where the chaotic waters are separated and dry land appears (see Gen 1:9-10). It is also used to describe the appearance of dry land from the waters in the miracles of the Reed Sea (Exod 14:16-29; 15:19) and Jordan River crossings (Josh 4:22). The root term (יבש) is also used for the dryness of the earth after the Noachic flood (Gen 8:7).

In relation to the third sign, what is interesting is at the dry and parched mountain, Horeb, Moses is told to take water from the river[676] and pour it upon the dry land. The reversal and contrast is evocative. The action of pouring out water on dry land is in itself unusual, as everywhere else in the biblical text God creatively acts to purposefully separate waters and dry land.[677] Yet, here on dusty holy ground Moses is told to unite water and dry land, those elements that are typically in the creational order kept separate. In this action, and the subsequent miracle, God once again reveals the marvellous capability of reversing the normal expectations and conventions. The wilderness enables Yahweh's wildness to be revealed.

*6.2.4.2.2 Water to Blood*

Second, this bewildering sign is further intensified through the water turning into blood on the dry land. Where one would expect the water to soak into the dry land, it instead turns to blood. Thus, it seems that the uniting of waters and dry land, whilst reversing creation norms, produces an unusual result in this context. In this manner, the third sign maintains the complexity of images just like the rod turning into a snake, for blood is both a symbol of life and death.[678] Hence, in the pouring out of water (life) on dry land (death), water becomes blood, a multivalent symbol as it combines both life and death implications.[679]

[676] Typically, understood to be The Nile.
[677] For example, in creation, the flood, the crossing of the Reed Sea and the Jordan River accounts.
[678] Enns, *Exodus*, 110.
[679] In addition, this imagery recalls the narrative of Abel's blood calling out from the ground (Gen 4). Likewise, the dry land cannot contain the water Moses pours onto it, and blood symbolically cries out. Specifically, this could also be representative of the blood of the infants thrown into the River Nile (Exod 1:22). Thus, the blood is crying out of the dry land.

Additionally, in this third sign, two different ways of life can be viewed. There is the image of water versus dry land, and subsequently, Egypt versus the worshippers-to-be in the wilderness. When the two meet, blood cries out, and life and death is visualised. Two worldviews clash, between the water-dependent versus wilderness-dependent peoples. The result will be blood being shed upon the dry land to allow the wilderness-people to be removed from the water-people.

Furthermore, in this sign, a transformation of Moses' life is also echoed. Although commentators state that Moses is the agent in the wonder, not the recipient, I think that he is much more involved in this sign than first perceived.[680] Moses was the water boy who has been removed from the water-rich sphere of Egypt. He is now being poured out on the dry land through his wilderness call and commission. Further, his life will become symbolised by blood as he returns to Egypt and once more be poured out. In fact, in time he will bring this sign of the blood, with the Nile turning to blood, in the sign of Passover, and in the death of the firstborns. Moreover, in the next passage, Zipporah, his wife, distinctively designates him as a 'bridegroom of blood' (Exod 4:25-26) after saving his life through circumcising their son. Moses' life, which was initially connected to water, via the transformation that has occurred in the dry land in his encounter with Yahweh, will upon his return to Egypt, bring the consequences of blood. Therefore, I suggest, that this sign not only connects to Yahweh's power and redemption, but also to Moses' life and mission. A transcendent sign and experience with God is clearly displayed in this encounter.

[680] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," 716.

*6.2.4.2.3 Summary*

In review, the sign of water turning to blood on the dry land not only captures reversal and complexity, but also foretells of events to come. It captures a transcendent and unique experience. Reversal, as typically God acts to keep dry land and water separate within the biblical text. Complexity, as the sign of blood can symbolise both life and death, and this may be why this sign is evidenced when water (life) and dry land (death) come into contact. Foretelling of events, as Moses the water-boy of Egypt is being distilled in the dry land of the wilderness, to return to the place of water to bring a sign of blood (to the Nile, Passover event and death of the firstborns). This third sign is distinctive in its ramifications and the wilderness landscape assists to leverage this for full impact. Not least of which, is its creation of a transcendent experience with Yahweh.

### *6.2.4.3 Sign #2: Hand Changed to White*

Finally, it has been useful to examine the first and third signs with the understanding that the wilderness setting fosters transcendent experiences. This same lens will now be applied to the second sign to consider whether Moses' hand turning 'leprous, as white as snow' (Exod 4:6) could yield further insights, heretofore unnoticed, in this theophanic encounter.

*6.2.4.3.1 Like Snow*

First, to begin the discussion, the reference and comparison of the skin disorder to snow is relevant, particularly as God is dialoguing with Moses in the wilderness space. In the dry, barren and hot wilderness,[681] Moses' hand becomes white like snow.

[681] And possibly even by the heat of the flames of the burning bush.

This is an unusual image to capture the event. Typically, snow portrays a cold, wet and very different geographical space to that of the wilderness. The contrast between the two terrains –wilderness and snow covered—could not be more opposite. Yet the narrator utilises this snow-like image to describe the sign.

To continue, Alter comments that the biblical image 'like snow' is a 'simile for total whiteness—in the case of skin, a loss of all pigmentation'.[682] However, for Hulse, the snow simile is used to highlight the flaking quality of the skin, not necessarily its colour, in which a skin disorder creates scales that when rubbed off resemble snowflakes.[683] For our purposes, this simile can evoke both pictures, but what I want to draw out is how the image interfaces with the foil of the burning bush in the wilderness. This change to Moses' hand is something that is super-natural and is described at odds with the current wilderness setting. In this, a moment of transcendent awe and fear of Yahweh must have been experienced by Moses.

*6.2.4.3.2 Leprosy & Hornets*

To develop the discussion further, the term typically translated 'leprosy' requires examination. First, the term used is צרעת. This refers to a range of skin disorders, and not to the modern-day Hansen's disease or leprosy.[684] Instead, צרעת is used in a variety of ways within the OT and could include skin disorders such as psoriasis, seborrhoeic

[682] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 326.
[683] E V. Hulse, "Nature of Biblical Leprosy and the Use of Alternative Medical Terms in Modern Translations of the Bible," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 107 (1975): 93–95. Although, Alter would disagree with this perspective, and conclude that it is used as simile to describe the whiteness of the skin (Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 326).
[684] John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, electronic ed., vol. 4, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 1998), 187. Specifically, the symptoms of צרעת do not coincide with Hansen's disease and this disease would not have reached the Palestine area within OT times.

dermatitis, fungal infections, eczema and so forth.[685] Thus its definition needs to be maintained as broad as possible. Hartley chose to define צרעת as '"a grievous skin disease", for "skin disease" is an accurate description of the ailment, and the term "grievous" conveys the emotional dimension of צרעת without suggesting any of its clinical properties'.[686] Whilst Moses is inflicted with a skin disease, the grievous or emotional part of his response to this change is conspicuously absent from the text. In fact, he responds obediently by putting his hand in and out of his cloak as directed. In this regard, the affliction in the wilderness setting is portrayed as overpowering for Moses.

As we delve further into the meaning of צרעת, Sawyer makes an interesting comment on the etymology of the word. There is another word that is derived from the same root צרעה, which is translated as wasp, hornet or a fearsome insect.[687] Based on this etymological link, Sawyer proposes that:

> we should expect there to be a connection between the skin condition called *ṣāraʿat* and the insect known as *ṣirʿâ:* and it seems at least possible that the condition got its name from the fact that the victim looked or felt as though he had been stung by a wasp or a swarm of wasps. References to swellings, inflammation and shiny reddish spots in Biblical descriptions of *ṣāraʿat*, corresponding to some of the symptoms of what we know as psoriasis, make this etymology reasonable.[688]

If Sawyer is correct in connecting the etymology of the word צרעת with צרעה then this adds another layer to the discussion. Not only is Moses playing with snakes in one

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[685] Hulse, "Nature of Biblical Leprosy", see especially 96.
[686] Hartley, *Leviticus*, 4:189. Other translations use 'infectious skin disease' (NIV) or 'malignant skin disease' or a 'chronic skin disease' (NEB).
[687] John F A. Sawyer, "Note on the Etymology of Sāraʿat," *Vetus Testamentum* 26, no. 2 (1976): 243. The term could also refer to yellow jackets, although the precise Hebrew term is unclear. "Hornet" came from the earliest Greek translation.
[688] Ibid., 244.

hand, but now with hornets in the other;[689] wild serpents and insects that both have a fierce bite. Not only does the rod change into a snake, but also his hand turns scale-like, similar to the skin of a snake. The wilderness is rough and harsh, and apparently so is Yahweh God who inflicts these signs on Moses. These are not nice or domestic signs. Instead, they are indicative of the battle that Moses is to face in Pharaoh's courts, but also the wild, unpredictable and untamable nature of Yahweh. It evokes the message that just as God can change a person's hand to completely contrast their own wholeness and location, God can change a situation that seems adverse to any change and intervention. Even so, while a transcendent experience, this is definitely not a tame experience with Yahweh.

*6.2.4.3.3 Affliction and Holy Ground*

Moreover, in this encounter, God tells Moses that he is on holy ground, yet afflicts his hand with a scale disease/leprosy. Elsewhere in the Bible, people who are afflicted with leprosy cannot even come near the holy place of the tabernacle/temple until they are healed and undergone the purification rituals (see Lev 13-14). In fact, they were to live apart from the rest of the community outside the camp to prevent the impurity being contagious. Therefore, it seems that again the rules for Yahweh's interaction with Moses in this wilderness space are different to those for the rest of the community. This complexity and unusualness is comparable to a snake being present on holy ground, as well as the (re)unification of water and dry land into blood. All in all, unique transformative, unexpected and transcendent experiences occur with Yahweh in the wilderness.

[689] In visualising this text, it is assumed that Moses would have naturally been standing with his staff in one hand, therefore, it would be the alternative hand that would change into snow-likeness.

*6.2.4.3.4 Summary*

In summary, the second sign, a white-like-snow leprous hand, at first glance is at odds with the wilderness landscape. Yet on close consideration, there are some commonalties; flaking dust-like skin and hornet-bite leprosy (due to the common root word, צרעה*)*. There are also deep differences to the accepted ways of Yahweh. This is in regards to the leprosy event occurring on holy ground, the hand being 'like snow', and no evidence of a 'grievous' reaction to the skin disease. As such, this sign highlights for Moses in combination with the two other signs, the transcendence of the wilderness encounter with Yahweh; resplendent with fearsomeness and inexplicable risk that only the wilderness landscape can promote.

***6.2.4.4 Summary: Signs to Moses: Snakes, Leprosy and Dry Land***

The wilderness fosters extreme signs for Moses in his engagement with Yahweh. Yet all the signs speak to the transcendence of an encounter that is not easily categorised. In fact, the signs are ambivalent, complex and multivalent. Indeed, they all culminate to highlight the wild nature of Yahweh. Yahweh does not act like any other, he can antagonise, inflict and act contrary to what is expected, even (or especially) on holy ground. The wilderness setting arguably enables these facets of Yahweh to be highlighted, due to its characterisation as a non-place; chaotic, liminal and even cursed. The wilderness is the ideal foil to Yahweh's miraculous and dramatic workings and a reason for appearing in this location. Moses, without doubt, would have been filled with awe, fear and rapture at these signs of Yahweh. Thus, it is clear that the wilderness setting enabled a transcendent experience with God to transpire.

### 6.2.5 Summary: Exodus 3:1-4:17

In Exod 3:1-4:17, Moses' experience of Yahweh in his wilderness theophanic appearance displays both the markers of heightened awareness and transcendence, which reflects a significant spiritual experience. The text clearly highlights that Moses' sensations, both visually (as he looks, sees and beholds a great sight) and physically (as his shoes are removed, feet grounded, encounter embodied), have been amplified in this experience with Yahweh. In return, Yahweh is displayed as equally having a sensory experience. However, his experience is different to Moses, in it extends beyond the boundaries of the wilderness and is amplified via the ability to see, hear, and know the suffering of Israel in Egypt (not just Moses' actions in the wilderness). Finally, the text distinctly reveals a transcendent experience between Moses and Yahweh. This was especially displayed in the complex and multivalent signs that Yahweh gives to Moses to confirm his role. Furthermore, when read through a wilderness lens, the signs uniquely reveal Yahweh as multifaceted, provoking and unexpected. Yahweh is wildly at home in the wilderness setting, and utilises this within his engagement with Moses. Consequently, the wilderness is an apt setting for Yahweh to encounter Moses, and for Moses to be involved in a transformative, although unpredictable, experience with Yahweh.

## 6.3 EXODUS 19:1-20:21; 24:9-18: EXPERIENCE AT SINAI

The experience of the characters—Moses, the elders and Israel—with Yahweh in the wilderness will be considered in Exod 19:1-20:21 and 24:9-18, especially in regards to the heightened sensory and transcendent experience. The sensory and mystical experience is not lacking in these passages, as God's appearance on Mt Sinai is

accompanied by 'sound and light to fully engage, even overpower, all five senses'.[690] To examine this in detail, instead of following the narrative sequence as in the Exod 3:1-4:17 section, the discussion will be divided into two main sections, which will focus on (1) Exod 19:1-20:21 and (2) Exod 24:9-18. Each section will address the most prominent aspects of sensual awareness and the transcendent experience, in various sub-sections.

**(a) EXODUS 19:1-20:21**

In the Sinai encounter with Yahweh, the description begins 'with double sight and double sound' (Exod 19:16-19).[691] In fact, there is no escaping the inundation to the senses with lightning and thick cloud, plus thunder and a loud trumpet blast (19:16). This is augmented in the subsequent verses, where the senses are further immersed with smoke and fire on view, and a ram's horn reverberating (19:18-19). The ongoing nature and 'continuous manifestation'[692] of the Sinai theophany is stressed, with the people overwhelmed in their senses by the appearance of God at this wilderness mountain, especially in the auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic realms. In this section, I will discuss each of these senses in turn noting how the wilderness setting enhances the experience of God. Further, this discussion will be intermingled with the transcendent effects of the encounter with God in the wilderness. The experience in Exod 19:1-20:21 will be addressed through examining (1) God's voice reverberating and the heightened senses, (2) God's voice reverberating and transcendence, (3) seeing Yahweh and (4) synesthestic experience.

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[690] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 175.
[691] Ibid.
[692] Ibid.

### 6.3.1 God's Voice Reverberates: Heightened Senses

From the start of the Sinai theophanic event, God emphasises that it will be an auditory experience.[693] That is, God is portrayed as drawing near so that the people may *hear* and obey his *voice* (19:5). Simply, God appears by means of a thick cloud, so that the people may *hear* and believe (19:9).[694] In the Sinai encounter, Yahweh undoubtedly utilises the isolation and barrenness of the wilderness setting to heighten the senses—especially the aural—of the people to convey his covenantal-creating message. This section will examine, therefore, how the auditory sense is heighted and utilised in the experience of the people with Yahweh.

#### *6.3.1.1 Amplified Hearing From the Cloud*

First, God chooses to appear in an utmost cloud or thick cloud. This, I propose, is a purposeful move in the wilderness space, as it assists to enhance the people's *hearing* of the words spoken to Moses.[695] That is, Yahweh remains hidden and elusive in this account, to concentrate the attention of the people of Israel to hear and obey God's voice. The focus is redirected within the sparse wilderness horizon, from the thick cloud to the voice, and in this move, the auditory is emphasised over the visual sensation. The wilderness setting, in its barrenness, further enhances the auditory

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[693] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 452.

[694] In Exod 19:9, the 'you' refers to Moses and highlights the relationship between Yahweh and Moses. 'The "you" in this verse is singular, but the event of the advent or coming of God in a dense, dark cloud is public. Ordinarily, God dwells with his people in a pillar of cloud and fire; but here it turns dense and pitch black' (Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 475).

[695] The quiet, vastly open and isolated distances allow the people to overhear the conversation; their senses are ideally heightened. Further, it enables them to see the cloud descend on the mountain. But there is a paradox with this, as the wilderness is a place not known for clouds – with such minimal rainfall, seeing a cloud would surely have been a momentous occasion, as it meant rainfall and refreshing from the endless dust and threatened survival. But instead of bringing rain, this cloud brings God and his words to them. While this is may be disappointing on the natural level, symbolically, refreshment and blessing rains upon the people through the words of Yahweh.

sense, as it acutely focuses the people's attention to the predominant sensation of sound: the voice of Yahweh.

#### *6.3.1.2 Yahweh's Voice in the Noise*

Second, God inundates the aural senses (along with others) in this wilderness encounter. The noise stimuli at this point in the narrative is booming; as thunder, ram's horn blasts, and the quaking of the mountain are all echoing (19:19). It is a wonder anything can be heard in the clamour. Yet once again, this sensory commotion is used to facilitate the attention of the people to the transcendent event and also pivots their attention to its most important aspect, the voice of Yahweh.

Specifically, the voice of Yahweh is highlighted in 19:19, as Moses speaks to God, and God answers with a voice (19:19). Hearing the voice of God is what the encounter has been driving towards from the very start. Expressly this is underlined, as God did not just 'answer', which would have been a satisfactory response and narrative accounting. But God answers Moses with a voice (קול). The text intensifies and expands the focus on hearing God speak at this decisive point in the passage through this description. God has not only answered, but has personally answered with a voice. Moreover, the speaking voice of God will ultimately lead to the theophany culminating in a covenant-establishing conversation between God and Moses (20:1-17).[696] In all of this, the wilderness setting facilitates both the sensory perception and transcendent experience of the encounter. The wilderness arena can echo with resounding noise, but also assist one to respond to the one sound of importance, the voice of Yahweh.

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[696] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 452.

Furthermore, the text aptly captures the motif of קול in 19:5 and 19:16-19. First, the passage is set up with the acknowledgement that if the people will obey Yahweh's voice (קול) they will be God's particular people (19:5). From this point, the term קול appears in rapid succession in the verses that herald the descent of Yahweh to Mount Sinai.[697] The plural term קלת (thunders) signals the theophanic appearing (19:16). This occurs in conjunction with the קול (sound) of the trumpet (19:16) that announced to the people that they were allowed to draw near to the mountain. Subsequently, the קול (sound) of the ram's horn grows louder and louder (19:19). In the midst of all this noise, Moses spoke and God climatically answers in a קול (voice) (19:19). Hence, the motif of sound, noise and voice reverberates through these verses, intermingling the multi-faceted sounds of creation and cultic images, thunder, trumpets and horns. This stems from Yahweh's appeal for the people to obey his קול (voice) and culminates with them hearing the קול (voice) of Yahweh.[698]

#### *6.3.1.3 The Priority of the Voice of God*

Third, the 'voice of God' rises to prominence in the narrative so that the visual elements diminish.[699] For example, the people are warned to not breakthrough the demarcated holy-zone and *gaze* upon Yahweh as this would cause them to perish (19:21). However, no such warning is given to them about overhearing the conversation of Moses and God. We conclude then, that God wants the people to hear him. Fretheim accordingly states that 'the unique character of this divine appearance

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[697] In the midst of this passage 19:7, Moses also sets the words of Yahweh, the דברים before the people.
[698] See Alter's chapter on 'The Technique of Repetition' that has guided my evaluation of these verses and the motif of קול. (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 88–113).
[699] See Savran's "Seeing is Believing" article for more detail of the priority of hearing as being the dominant biblical way to perceive Yahweh (Savran, "Seeing Is Believing").

is for the sake of a right hearing and understanding of these words of God, not an experience of the presence of God as such'.[700] The focus is therefore, concentrated on hearing God, not seeing God, which becomes secondary in this instance. The reason being that God is speaking some of the most significant words (דברים 20:1) for all ancient Israel; those of covenant-making and community-creating.

#### *6.3.1.4 Summary*

In summary, the purpose of the theophanic encounter in Exod 19:1-20:21 is framed so that the people hear and obey the voice of God. This is amplified by there being limited visual elements but rather, an inundation of the aural senses. All of this intensifies the focus on and prioritises the voice of Yahweh. The silent wilderness terrain facilitates this aptly and heightens the hearing of the voice of Yahweh.

### 6.3.2 God's Voice Reverberates: Overwhelming Transcendence

In hearing the voice of Yahweh along with his appearance at Mount Sinai, the transcendence of the encounter is also heightened, not just the auditory mode of sensation. This transcendence is displayed through the people of Israel not being able to endure hearing God speak the covenant creating words, as well as the warnings regarding the danger of the encounter. This section will examine the response of the people to their heightened auditory sense and the transcendence experienced in this wilderness encounter with Yahweh.

[700] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 214–215.

#### *6.3.2.1 Do Not Speak To Us God*

In Exod 19:1-20:21, the people of Israel resisted the heightened perception of their experience with Yahweh, especially the aural, and the resultant extraordinariness it fostered. Principally, they chose to remove themselves from hearing the voice of God and asked Moses, 'Speak with us that we may hear, but let not God speak with us lest we die' (20:19). In this, the people of Israel rejected the experience of Yahweh, especially that of hearing God's voice directly via their auditory sense due to their fear of death.

It is reasonable to seek shelter from the experience of Yahweh's wilderness appearance both in terms of its sensuality and transcendence. Stuart comments, 'This makes considerable sense in light of the consistent biblical witness to the ear-shattering volume of the voice of God. In all other cases where God is recorded as speaking audibly, the sound is described as deafeningly loud'.[701] Hence, the response of the people to Yahweh's deafening voice—to tremble, stand at a distance (20:18) and ask Moses to mediate—is warranted.[702] The utter commotion of the event and assault on the senses has created an awe-inspiring and even awe-full encounter as the signs and voice of Yahweh dominate the landscape.

The people's action of 'standing back' as a physical reaction to the sounds they are hearing is an instinctive move to an encounter of this volume. Specifically, as Alter observes, the phrasing of 'draw back' (20:18) literally means '"swayed," suggesting a

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[701] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:468.

[702] In this Sinai event, 'the outcome is that the people confirm the prophetic role of Moses as intermediary between them and God, and promise to obey him absolutely' (Moshe Greenberg, "נסה in Exodus 20:20 and the Purpose of the Sinaitic Theophany," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, no. 3 [1960]: 274).

motion of involuntary recoil'.[703] Thus, whilst the barren and isolated wilderness may have acted as a good forum to harness the voice of God as previously discussed, the wilderness also amplified and intensified the fearsomeness of the whole encounter. There was no doubt that something profound is occurring and someone Other is speaking.

Thus, the wilderness is an ideal location for Yahweh to be encountered due to the heightened senses and transcendence. However, there is the evident risk that the people would be overwhelmed by it all. In this situation, it proved to occur. Both the heightened senses and the utter transcendence were too much, and as a consequence, the people recoiled from the voice and experience of Yahweh.

#### *6.3.2.2 Encounter Yahweh: Beware of Death*

In addition, God warned the people regarding the risk of this transcendent encounter. Expressly, the people were doubly warned against breaking through to the mountain to either touch it or see God, 'lest they die' (19:12; 21). The encounter was perilous in its transcendence, and thus, preventive measures were implemented to protect the sacred-profane boundaries of the experience. However, it was as a result of God speaking to them (and not via sight or touch) that the people perceived the threat of death (20:19). The people of Israel associated the danger of death in the encounter with hearing the voice of God. Whereas, Yahweh indicated that crossing over the holy borders of the mountain to touch or gaze at Yahweh meant certain death.

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[703] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 432.

Each character in this narrative has a different perspective of the fear-inducing boundaries and acts accordingly. It is presumed that the people would have survived hearing the voice of God—despite its ear-shattering volume—as there were no limitations placed on this. Equally, it is suggested that Yahweh expected the people to 'sway' toward or return to hear his voice, recognising the moment for its distinctive and extraordinary sacredness, as Yahweh answers with a voice. However, the people remained 'swayed away'. In the wild landscape, the people experienced the limits and did not desire to be caught up in such an overwhelming encounter.

#### *6.3.2.3 Experience of God (sans aural) Continues*

Moreover, in this theophanic encounter, whilst the people forbid God to speak to them directly, they did not ask God to *not* appear or remove himself completely. They did not fully cast aside the powerful and dramatic God. That is, Yahweh their covenantal God, who had delivered them from Egypt through powerful signs, led them miraculously through the wilderness and appears before them now in a similar dramatic nature. But it is the immediate voice of God they dispel, asking for it to be mediated through Moses. Arguably, in this action they reject truly knowing God; for in hearing the motivations, thoughts and character of a person are understood. In addition, the emphasis on Divine Words is paramount for ancient Israel[704] and highlights the centrality of speech and hearing, but this is rejected.

In spite of the primacy of words, the people snubbed hearing God directly in the future. Even so, their actions and words confirmed the initial purpose of the theophany as introduced by Yahweh. That is, Yahweh desired that they hear the

[704] As per chapter 5.

divine speech for the purpose of trusting in Moses (19:9). Further, God requests that the people obey his voice, so they can be his treasured people (19:5). Thus, in accordance to the narrative of Exod 19:1-20:21, the people did hear God's voice answering Moses, and thereby, trusted Moses to speak to them. The people responded that they would do all that Yahweh had spoken (19:8), even though they no longer desired to hear him directly.

However, in this I cannot be left but feeling dissatisfied. The people of Israel forfeited fully engaging with Yahweh and encountering his voice personally, however, the intangible and mysterious nature of the wilderness lends itself to the conclusion that Yahweh purposefully chose this site to be revealed but still be concealed. The wilderness landscape forges the risk, the difficulty, and the wonder of engaging with Yahweh. In turn, ideal or decorous reactions are not expected; rejection, questioning and recoiling can occur in the wilderness. The God-in-the wilderness is engaging and drawing close, but also dangerous and domineering in noise. Hence, the response of the people highlights the difficulty, as well as the mystery and elusiveness, in truly encountering Yahweh.

#### *6.3.2.4 Summary*

In summary, to hear the voice of Yahweh at Mount Sinai was an experience of risk, fear and transcendence. The text portrayed that the people could not bear the intensity of the deafening theophany that the wilderness promoted, requesting that God no longer speak to them. Death and fright were present in this encounter with the people experiencing their limits, perceiving this to be the result of the voice of God (not the sight of God, which they were warned to create barriers to protect). Overwhelmed, the

people drew back from the voice of Yahweh. Even so, they still participated in the experience of Yahweh but no longer wanted to hear his voice, rather, asking Moses to be their mediator. In the encounter with Yahweh, the wilderness setting amply aids a transcendent experience, promoting the fear, risk and dread.

### 6.3.3 Seeing Yahweh

To continue the examination of the theophany experience of Yahweh at Mount Sinai in Exod 19:1-20:21, I will turn to examine the role of visual perception. As discussed in chapter four, God appeared in the wilderness through many dramatic visual signs at Sinai such as cloud, fire, smoke. Therefore, it is assumed that the wilderness both enhanced the visual perception of the people of Israel plus the transcendence of the encounter.

#### *6.3.3.1 Do not Break Through to See God*

The first clear visual perception reference that is used in the passage Exod 19:1-20:21 is the request of Yahweh to Moses. This is where God warns the people to not break through the holiness barriers 'to Yahweh to *look* and many of them perish' (19:21). The danger and transcendence of the encounter is clearly present via the demarcation of the holiness zones, however, the heightened visual sensation is viewed as dangerous also and is curtailed in this scenario.

The quotation of 'not looking' is located within a triple reference to not breaking through to the presence of Yahweh. In this way, the sanctity of the mountain with the descent of God is highlighted, as well as its importance in the literary structure of this

passage.[705] Yet, I would suggest that in the repetition of 'not breaking through' three times, the key focus is on this second warning, as it differs from the other two warnings, including Moses' response.[706] Expressly, in the first warning, the people are warned 'not to go up (עלה) into the mountain' (19:12). In the second warning, the people are cautioned to 'not break through to the LORD to *look* (ראה)' (19:21). Moses responds to Yahweh after the second warning by saying that 'the people cannot go up (עלה) to the Mount' (19:23). And in the final warning, the people must 'not break through to come up (עלה) to the LORD' (19:24). The repetition in this section clearly emphasises that the warning of 'not ascending' (עלה) beyond the barrier is important. But I would propose that the specific reason for why the people should not ascend is accentuated via the exception to this pattern. Thereby, verse 21 is crucial as it underscores the reason the people should not ascend, which is to prevent a breaking through to 'look' at Yahweh. This stands out in the repeated warnings due to its unusualness, and becomes what Yahweh is chiefly defending. God does not want the people to break through the mountain's barrier of holiness to gaze inappropriately at him. Thus, it is assumed that God safeguards against this further by appearing within either smoke or thick cloud whenever on the mountain; for seeing Yahweh is a risky act.

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[705] As seen in #3.3.2.

[706] Alter addresses 'The Techniques of Repetition', noting that when you have a text that 'exhibits a high degree of literal repetition, what you have to look for more frequently is the small but revealing difference in the seeming similarities, the nodes of emergent new meanings in the patterns of regular expectations created by explicit repetition' (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 97). Further, Alter states that 'small but important changes are introduced in what usually looks like at first glance like verbatim repetition. Many of the psychological, moral, and dramatic complications of biblical narrative are produced through this technique. … Broadly, when repetitions with significant variations occur in the biblical narrative, the changes introduced can point to an intensification, climatic development, acceleration, of the actions and attitudes initially represented, or, on the other hand, to some unexpected, perhaps unsettling new revelation of character or plot' (Ibid., 97–98). It is on this premise of Alter's that the argument of this section is developed.

#### *6.3.3.2 Limitation of Seeing in the Wilderness*

The limiting of the visual sense would appear, however, at odds with the wilderness setting, where the sensations are heightened. Yet this correlates with the typical emphasis of theophanies, which is on hearing the words of Yahweh, and where the visual elements are primarily used to attract initial attention.[707] Thus, as a relationship pre-exists between Israel and Yahweh, this theophany is not especially focused on attracting attention (although it cannot be denied that many dramatic visual signs are occurring). Instead, Yahweh has limited the visual revelation of his own self in this theophany and prioritised the words spoken.

Although, even with the limits of the visual elements, Lane highlights that sometimes 'what is not seen can often be more compelling to the imagination than what is seen. The metaphor of the partially disclosed mountain, alluring in its mystery and inaccessibility, has gripped the human imagination'.[708] In turn, the metaphor of a hidden God is captivating in its mystery, transcendence and aids to engage the imagination and even participation with God.[709] So even though the visual has been reduced greatly in this theophany, in that the form of Yahweh is not seen, there is an increased curiosity about Yahweh. This curiosity intentionally draws the focus to the other senses, hearing Yahweh's words and experiencing Yahweh's presence.

#### *6.3.3.3 Summary*

In summary, the visual experience in this encounter is particular. First, the people are instructed to not break through the holiness barriers 'to see' God, due to risk of death.

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[707] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 321–326.
[708] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 101.
[709] See also Otto, *The Idea of Holy*.

Second, this instruction, in its restriction of the visual senses that are typically on alert in the wilderness is unusual. Yet, arguably the limitation aids to foster the mysteriousness and transcendence of the experience, as well as heighten Israel's other senses, especially the aural and experiential, in the encounter.

### 6.3.4 Synesthetic Experience: Seeing Sounds

The overall sensory perception by the people to the theophany in Exod 19:1-20:21 is largely portrayed as a synesthetic experience, where the people's senses are engaged and heightened in the wilderness setting. This is due to not only the setting but also the dramatic appearance of Yahweh.

To narrate the theophany, the sensation of sight is kept central, even though it is narrated via 'combining auditory and visual perception' in four phrases (Exod 20:18).[710] That is the people '*saw*' the sounds of thunder, the flashes of lightning, the sound of the horn, and the mountain smoking. Thus, whilst beset by auditory, kinaesthetic and visual elements, the narrator concludes that the people 'saw' these theophanic signs. It is Israel's intensified 'seeing' experience, in regards to both sensations and transcendence, I will now examine.

#### *6.3.4.1 Seeing with all Senses*

To begin, in reference to the key verse Exod 20:18, Alter observes, 'Logically, of course, the objects of seeing would be only lightning and the smoking mountain, but the writer presents the Sinai epiphany as one tremendous synesthetic experience that

[710] Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 136.

overwhelms the people'.[711] In line with this, the translation 'to see' is expressed by the Hebrew participle ראים (*'rō'îm*). This Hebrew form defines a wider sense of perceiving beyond purely seeing. It can 'indicate simultaneous sensory awareness',[712] or 'to see with all the senses'.[713] Hence, in this manner ראים is intended to convey the immediacy of the experience, including, but not limited to, the sense of sight in this wilderness space.[714]

Translators, therefore, try to capture that people are experiencing more than just everyday 'seeing' in 20:18, as Israel's experience is powerfully transcendent.[715] For example, Durham translates 20:18 as the people 'were experiencing', due to the range of sensory phenomena that directly follows the verb; thunder, lightning, sound of the horn and smoke.[716] Likewise, Dozeman adheres to this translation.[717] Alternatively, Hamilton states that the people 'were beholding', 'as it expresses action contemporaneous with what has transpired earlier'.[718] Polak, however, in his examination of the verse argues that the pericope centres on the fuller phrase ראים את הקולת, which he translates as 'all the people saw the sounds'.[719] Whilst I disagree with this translation, especially in how קלת is translated,[720] I agree with

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[711] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 432.
[712] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 321. Further, Savran notes, 'The interrelationship of (and the difficulty of drawing clear lines between) the audial and the visual of verbal prophecy and visionary experience, reveals a basic truth of biblical religious experience. Contact with the divine is often described by invoking a variety of modes of expression, all of which are but limited approximations of the experience' (Ibid.).
[713] Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 485.
[714] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 468.
[715] It is noteworthy that Alter in his translation does not choose to introduce a word to include his observance of 'synesthetic experience'. But I will shortly discuss why I think that keeping the translation as 'seeing' is the stronger one for the literary coherence of this text.
[716] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:301.
[717] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 468.
[718] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 354.
[719] Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 137.
[720] The translation of קלת should be thunders, not sounds, as this noun has a different meaning in the plural as compared to the singular (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 296).

Polak's insight that aims to capture the essence of this verse. That is, that the people's perception 'refers to something stronger and more inclusive than "hearing", e.g. synaestheic "seeing", or "witnesses and experienced"'.[721] In this vein, the *Jewish Publication Society (JPS)* translates it as the people 'witnessed'. All in all, the scholarship is clear that the people of Israel are caught up in an experience unlike anything that they had ever seen, heard or felt before. In addition, Durham states that the 'emphasis on the theophany as *experienced* by Israel is an important authentication of the instructions as given by Yahweh, in contrast to any that might originate with men'.[722] This is a powerful experience and the people's senses are indeed heightened and overwhelmed by transcendence in the wilderness.

Exod 20:18 is the first time that the Hebrew has used the participle ריאם in the Pentateuch, and it is clearly used to encompass the overwhelming breadth of perceptual and ongoing sensory input that the people are encountering with Yahweh's appearing.[723] There is a wild freedom in how Yahweh is revealed. The wilderness is hence used to expressly display the nature of God as free, wild and fierce. Further, the wilderness setting enhances the attention and the freedom of the people's response to

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[721] Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 137.
[722] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:318 (emphasis original). Durham continues, 'These are not Moses' "guiding decisions," but *Yahweh's*, just as the commandments are the ten words of *Yahweh's* expectation, not Moses' expectation' (Ibid.).
[723] Why is the term ראים used in Exod 20:18 (with its root 'to see')? Especially as it places the prominence on visual perception in a passage where the auditory has been the focus. In regards to this, Savran states, 'It is not accidental that the narrator of Exod 20:18 did not say that "all the people *heard* the thundering and the lightnings", but deliberately chose a verb of seeing to describe the people's impression of the Sinai theophany' (Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 322). I agree with Savran, that the narrator has been very specific in using 'a verb of seeing', however, for slightly different reasons, which I will discuss in turn. First, Savran correctly acknowledges that the narrators are very clear when they use auditory or visual verbs in their description of theophanic encounters, with particular priority placed on the auditory sense. However, Savran concludes that when the Hebrew text is referring to overall general perception in theophanic encounters *seeing* is the preferred choice (Ibid., 320-321). This is to demonstrate the priority of the auditory sense, as usually in theophanic encounters one will first 'see' a visual element, but the 'hearing' of the message of Yahweh will overtake the visual in significance. Hence, in Exod 20:18 where the message of Yahweh is not directly being spoken but the narrator is portraying the reaction of the people to the theophany, the conclusion is that the narrator has opted for the general perception participle verb of 'seeing' to showcase this.

Yahweh. They are enabled to engage in all their senses to this transcendent moment. Therefore, they experience (ראים) Yahweh, with fresh perception and transcendent awe.

Moreover, as the narrative continues, the people are described as 'seeing' the mountain in smoke and that 'they trembled with fear and stood at a distance' (Exod 20:18b). The root ראה appears twice in quick succession.[724] But what is significant is as the people '"realized, took in" the experience of which they were a part, the people trembled, and drew back even from the perimeter of safety set about Sinai for their protection'.[725] That is, as the people 'saw', expressly a specific geographical place—the mountain in smoke—they are moved to a new action in the narrative; that of trembling and standing back. The effect of seeing/experiencing the mountain in smoke, which is the sign of the presence of Yahweh descending, was enough to cause them to remove themselves. This amplified perception highlighted the danger as well as the transcendence of the moment. This sight of Yahweh's descent on the mountain was too much, so they moved back.[726]

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[724] First, in the form of ראים (18a) a *Qal active participle* that 'summarizes the continuity of the people's experience'. Plus second, in the form of וירא (18b) a *Qal Wayiqtol* that implies 'narrative continuity and the next step in the people's experience' (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:302–303). Thus, as the people ראים the theophanic signs as a continual uninterrupted activity (as indicated via the participle form), and in addition וירא the mountain in smoke, the people were prompted to respond by drawing back.

[725] Ibid., 3:303.

[726] Lastly, a final reference to ראה is when God concludes, 'You have *seen* that from the heavens I have spoken to you' (20:22). The formulation of this verse clearly echoes the introduction to the covenant 19:3 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt'. This highlights the progression in the text from the public giving of the covenant and Ten Words, to the private revelation of the Book of the Covenant (Dozeman, *Exodus*, 508–509). Again, this is an odd mix of perception verbs to describe what has occurred in the theophany, to 'see' someone 'speak'. Although, this perfectly sums up all that has been perceived on Sinai, as per Savran's position of choosing the visual mode to describe overall theophanic insight. Further, Israel did see many signs from heaven, and they also *saw* Moses conversing. So it does make sense that they have *seen* the voice of God speaking to them in this profound encounter.

#### *6.3.4.2 Summary*

The experience of the theophany in Exod 19:1-20:21 pulsated all of Israel's senses. So much so, that the people were assailed in a synesthestic experience with Yahweh. To capture the vast sensory and transcendent event, the narrator/s utilises the term ראים, where Israel not only saw, but heard, felt and witnessed Yahweh's appearance as never before. Again, the wilderness ideally captured the sensory and transcendent overload, due to its otherwise barren and isolated character. Furthermore, when Israel sees the mountain in smoke with the descent of God, this results in the people recoiling and standing back. The heightened perception results in a new narrative action that displays Israel's terror and transcendence of the event. Yahweh has appeared and consequently, even the sight of the geographical place of the mountain in smoke (not the visible God) was too overpowering.

### 6.3.5 Physical Experience: Touching God

Fretheim is correct in stating the priority of hearing in Exod 19:1-20:21.[727] However, the overall encounter that the people experienced was very visceral, as it included sight, feeling, touch and smell. These aspects must not be overlooked, so in this section, I will briefly consider how the people experienced the encounter with God via their perception of touch and feeling.

#### *6.3.5.1 Touching the Mountain*

Even before the encounter occurred, as already noted, Yahweh was very clear in setting a perimeter around Mount Sinai and warning the people as well as animals not

[727] Fretheim specifically states that 'the unique character of this divine appearance is for the sake of a right hearing and understanding of these words of God, not an experience of the presence of God as such' (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 214–215).

to *touch* or go up the mountain (19:12-13). It was so serious, that if anyone did *touch* the mountain they were to be put to death, without anyone else *touching* the offender. Further, part of the process included not going near a woman (19:15) as a sign of consecration.[728] Although these are 'temporary and arbitrary'[729] boundaries, it indicated that due to God's presence the mountain was transformed; it became the 'mountain of God'. A holy and set apart mountain-place that jutted out in the wilderness, and thereby, the people needed to approach cautiously, aware of the mount's holiness. It was only when the trumpet blasts that the people were able to then *touch* or come up the mount. Thus, it is sound that breaks the temporary barrier, and gives permission to *touch* and come up. Herein, the centrality of aural perception in this theophany is once again reinforced.

Furthermore, the warning not to touch or break through the barrier is given three times (19:12-13; 21-22; 24). This 'is a standard literary practice when the text wants us to notice an important subject. Thus the boundary between the human and the divine is not to be taken lightly by mortals'.[730] Although in examining this, the 'not touching of the mountain' in verses 12-13 are amplified in verses 21-22 and 24 to the 'not breaking through to Yahweh'. There is a shift that draws the focus from the mountain to Yahweh himself; and the not-touching shifts to the not-forcing or not-destroying existing barriers. It goes beyond plain touching to a destructive touching,

[728] The root נגש typically means coming into 'near proximity to the object … it does not usually signify actual contact', for example the drawing near to a respected king or person or God. However, as it is used in this verse, it refers to sexual relations. See (Leonard J. Coppes, "Nāgaš," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1999], 553).
[729] Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 475.
[730] Ibid., 476.

as a 'breakthrough would be a destructive action against God's sanctity'.[731] Moreover, the repeated warnings, although potentially 'overly cautious', highlights 'the human inclination to control one's way to holiness'.[732]

Overall, this is an encounter that engages the whole person fully; sight, sound and physically. The people enter into the holy zone of the mountain by drawing near to the presence of God. The physicality grounds their faith and experience of the Sinai covenant in this place. Amongst the noise and sights of roaring thunder and flashing lighting, smoke and fire, God is looking for a people to come up, to enter the holy zone, and draw near. A physical response is expected, beyond seeing and hearing, to Yahweh's coming and words. But it is a response guided by Yahweh's directions.

#### *6.3.5.2 Staying at a Distance*

Second, what is intriguing is that although God demarcates a boundary for the people, warning them that if they cross it they will be destroyed, by the end of the encounter the people freely 'stayed at a distance' (20:18). The people of Israel voluntarily created their own boundary of how far they were willing to go and what they were willing to touch. Staying at a distance specifically 'implies that they kept well behind the safety perimeter that Moses set around the mountain'.[733] Hence, the people perceived the situation differently to Yahweh.

The people do not *touch* the mount when they have full permission to *touch.* This is exemplified further when the people choose to not *hear* God, yet the warning was

[731] Harold G. Stigers, "Hāras," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 224.
[732] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 177.
[733] Ryken, *Exodus*, 678.

given against *seeing* God. It appears that the people respond in reverse to the boundaries that God imposes.

It would be a safe conclusion to state that fear has overtaken ancient Israel's senses, so the people renegotiate the boundaries in an attempt to protect themselves and remove themselves from the uncontrollable transcendence. Similarly, the influence of the chaotic, threatening, yet beautiful wilderness would have influenced people's perceptions, as the landscape would amplify the people's sensual and transcendent experience. As such, the isolation and barrenness of the wilderness in combination with the dramatic appearance of Yahweh would have intensified the experience of this encounter. Likewise, the appearance of God is atypical and does not fit within any preconceived categories; who is Yahweh, a God who does not require temples, artifacts, or religious systems? Instead, he is a God who chooses a location hidden and isolated—a scared wilderness mountain—to be revealed. Further, Yahweh is a God who allows the people to 'come up', to draw near and to touch the holy mount. This unpredictable mysterious God is seemingly too paradoxical for the people. In combination with the accompanying pyrotechnic effects of Yahweh's closeness, the people could not handle the overwhelming nature of this encounter with Yahweh. So much so, the people drew back trembling and did not want to listen anymore.

#### *6.3.5.3 Trembling*

Additionally, in regards to a physical response, in Exod 19:16 all the people are portrayed as trembling (חרד, *ḥārad*) in response to the thunder and lightning, the thick cloud and the voice of the trumpet blast. The people at this point were still outside the defined bounds of Sinai, within the comfort and safety of their own camp and tents.

Yet the dramatic events preparing for the theophanic appearing of Yahweh reverberates to the camp, and sets the people to fearful trembling. This once again is not a tame or contained theophany; it is shaking all. The people are not just observing the theophany with their eyes and ears, but are physically responding and quaking at the presence of Yahweh's appearance. They are engaged, and are no longer merely spectators.

Further, the people are not alone in this trembling, for as the narrative continues, the whole mount is likewise portrayed as quaking or trembling greatly (חרד, 19:18). Unusually, the mount is personified in this narrative, and thereby mirrors the equivalent effects that the people are experiencing. However, for Dozeman, this highlights the 'cosmic quality' of the mountain and the significance of what is occurring in this pivotal event.[734] Particularly, this also continues a theme that has been significant in the Book of Exodus; that liberation is not just for God's identified people, but that it is for all—animals, earth, mountains and people—all creation is included.[735] Thus, not only is the mountain 'cosmic' in its trembling and reaction to the theophany, but the theme of this passage has 'cosmic' ramifications too.

Nevertheless, the theme of fear is reinforced at the approach of Yahweh that physically moves both people and mountain. This shaking is not just a reflexive response, but it is a trembling that 'connotes fear'[736] or 'emotional agitation before an unusual circumstance'.[737] Similarly, the image of Mount Sinai trembling 'is not of an

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[734] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 457.
[735] See especially Fretheim's work on this as a literary motif. For example Fretheim, *Exodus*, 12–13; Fretheim, "Because the Whole Earth Is Mine," 237–238.
[736] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 456.
[737] Andrew Bowling, "Ḥārad," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 321.

earthquake, but of fear at the approach of God like the people in v. 16b'.[738] Thus, whilst there is physical evidence of shaking, trembling and earth quaking, this is not purely due to natural consequences. Instead, this is an all-encompassing awe that visibly shakes the body and mountain.

Furthermore, this quaking is not contained; the trembling extends from all the people in the camp to the wilderness mount. The differentiation of the holy mountain zone, so clearly set out earlier in the text (19:12-15), does not contain or separate the quaking that is being experienced. It overwhelms all; camp and mountain, calling full attention to the arrival and descent of Yahweh to speak to his people.

Later in the text, the people once again tremble (20:18). Specifically, this is related to their reaction of *seeing* the theophany and a different root term is used to describe this experience, נוע. Kaiser recognises that the term נוע 'conveys the ideas of being physically swayed and experiencing great mental agitation and emotional trembling'.[739] In addition, the root for נוע is also used 'to refer to movement on a geographic scale' to describe the wandering or movement of people.[740] Thus, this connects unmistakably to the next action in the verse, where 'the people stand far off' (20:19). The people have been swayed and moved, so much so that they are no longer standing on the mount, but are standing far off. They have removed themselves from

[738] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 457.
[739] Kaiser Jnr, "Exodus," 485.
[740] Andrew Bowling, "Nûaʿ," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 564.

the source of their agitation and trembling and thus, a physical encounter with Yahweh.[741]

#### *6.3.5.4 Summary*

Yahweh in his theophanic appearance desired the people at Sinai to draw near to him in a physical response at the mountain. Therefore, Yahweh set in place boundaries to demarcate the mountain of God. Once an auditory signal was given, the people were to draw near to God on this consecrated wilderness mount. Yet, the people, overwhelmed by the dramatic appearance of Yahweh, responded in fear and trembling, and chose to stay at a distance. The tremendous presence of Yahweh and the transcendence of the experience, which caused the mount and the Israelite camp to greatly tremble (חרד), was too much. Therefore, the people imposed their own boundaries, choosing not to touch what they were given full permission to do. In fact, the people are eventually portrayed as standing far off, distant to Yahweh's original intention of drawing near. The experience of Yahweh for Israel is cast as volatile, unfathomable and a cause of great fear. The wilderness setting, all the more, did not provide any comfort but rather, heightened both the sensory and transcendent experience beyond the people's perceived endurance.

### 6.3.6 Summary: Exodus 19:1-20:21

Overall, in Exod 19:1-20:21, the people experienced a momentous encounter with Yahweh. The wilderness setting supports the dramatic occurrence, as it heightened the people's senses as well as their perception of the transcendent. The experience with

[741] Interestingly, in Numbers 32:13 נוע describes the 40 years of wilderness *wandering* that the people of Israel were subject to. This leads one to wonder, whether the drawing back of the people here at Sinai is a step towards the *wandering* that the people will experience shortly once they leave Sinai.

Yahweh was indeed multi-sensory. The people heard his voice, saw him appear in cloud and fire, engaged synaesthetically, and were invited to physically draw near. In these various modes all the senses of the people were inundated at the appearing of Yahweh. Furthermore, the wilderness setting acutely captured, increased and sharpened the experience of Yahweh, due to its natural isolation, craggy acoustics and powerful terrain. In addition, the overwhelmed senses in combination with the pyrotechnic appearance of Yahweh created a transcendent experience, one which resulted in vast fear and trembling of the people. So much so, that they requested to not hear anymore, and drew back instead of drawing near to Yahweh. This response indicates that they keenly knew that they were engaging with a mysterious and uncontainable marvel—the 'I AM'. However, the people were not able to engage with Yahweh's voice or presence, seeking out the presumed safety of their camp and the mediating voice of Moses. They portrayed that they preferred a diluted experience of the domestic tents, with their own imposed boundaries of security, rather than engaging with the wilderness Yahweh.

In sum, Yahweh's choice to appear at Mount Sinai unsurprisingly heightened the sensory and transcendent experience. As a result the theophany was wild as it was personal. Conclusively, Yahweh displays an affinity for the fierce wilderness landscape as the place to be revealed in wonder, intimate relationship and authentic character.

**(b) EXODUS 24:9-18**

In turning to the second part of the experience of the Sinai theophany in Exod 24:9-18, the encounter with God in the wilderness will continued to be reviewed through

the framework of the wilderness setting enhancing the senses and transcendent experience. Foremost, it is clear that Exod 24:9-18 is very different to Exod 19:1-20:21 in respect to the sensory experience. The major divergence is that the visual aspect of the theophany is emphasised, as the auditory aspect is muted. In fact, the lack of auditory senses boosts the intensity of the transcendent nature of the encounter. Thus, this section will approach the aspects of heightened senses through a discussion of (1) the silence of the theophany with no words spoken and (2) the visual experience of seeing and beholding God. In addition, the transcendent experience will be engaged in a section that discusses (3) silently seeing heaven and its fostering of an awe-filled experience.

### 6.3.7 Silence With No Words Spoken

The Exod 24:9-18 theophanic encounter is different to the other encounters that this chapter has explored in relation to perception and the senses, as the auditory sense is absent.[742] There are no speeches recorded by any characters; Yahweh, Moses or the elders. This sets this theophanic encounter apart from the other encounters in the Book of Exodus, and I suggest results in escalating the transcendence of the experience. This section, will therefore, discuss the silence and absence of the auditory sensation in this passage.

#### *6.3.7.1 Resonating Silence*

In Exod 24:9-18, there are no words spoken and thus heard. Moses, for once, is not the mediator who is required to speak for God; in fact, he is silent alongside the other

[742] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 329.

elders in this exchange. Moreover, Yahweh does not speak. As Nicholson observes, 'Nothing is said nor does the passage anticipate any dialogue between the representative of Israel and God and there is no suggestion of an ensuing address or proclamation by God to his people'.[743] Therefore, the emphasis remains on the primary sense of sight, as well as the transcendence of the experience that the eerie silence assists to generate.

There is then, a reversal of the sensuality in this theophanic encounter. The seeing of God is amplified and hearing non-apparent. This is in comparison to the Exod 19:1-20:21 encounter, where God remained hidden from sight, and words were spoken and hearing was central. The Exod 24:9-18 encounter is reverse. However, this contrast and the absence of speech attunes us to the vital nature of this encounter. Savran aptly summarises, 'In spite of the fact that no verbal message is attached to this theophany, the redaction of the entire pericope of Exod 19-24 marks this experience as the climax of the Sinai theophany'.[744] The climax of this passage is that the elders see God, and this is without the hiddenness, cloudiness and dramatic nature of other theophanies. They see God in clarity and purity, they see into God's heavenly residence, whilst standing on the wilderness mountain. Therefore, to accentuate this otherworldly visual encounter with Yahweh, words fall silent.

### 6.3.8 Visual Experience: Seeing the God of Israel

As noted, the perception that is heightened in the Exod 24:9-18 wilderness encounter is sight. When Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel

[743] E.W. Nicholson, "The Interpretation of Exodus XXIV 9-11," *Vestus Testamentum* 24, no. 1 (1974): 96.
[744] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 332.

ascend the mountain at Yahweh's request, they 'saw the God of Israel' (24:10) and 'beheld' God (24:11). They visually engaged with Yahweh.

#### *6.3.8.1 Seeing and Intense Seeing*

Expressly, in this experience, the narrator directly and concisely accounts for the visual perception in the theophanic event. Two different words are utilised: ראה (24:10) and חזה (24:11) to describe the characters' perception of God in the wilderness. The first, ראה is the strong verb 'to see, look' that is commonly used within the biblical text to describe everyday seeing.[745] This verb ראה however, is expanded upon with a second term, חזה; a term that 'denotes an intense perception of what is actually there and is true'.[746] In addition, חזה 'often signifies prophetic insight'.[747] Typically, the verb חזה is found in poetry and 'regularly refers to the experiences of prophetic visions (e.g. Amos 1:1; Isa 1:1; Mic 1:1; and Hab 1:1)'.[748] As a result, the use of these two sight descriptors aims 'to align the experience of the elders with those of the prophets'.[749] Accordingly, it highlights the intensified nature of the sight the elders are experiencing in the wilderness theophany.

More than normal vision is used here at the wilderness mount. In fact, the different sight verbs aid to underscore the intensity of sight and perception that occurred within the theophanic encounter but also within the wilderness setting.[750] The elders are portrayed as seeing beyond the ordinary. Their vision is detailed as prophetic and

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[745] This term has been examined in conjunction with previous passages within this chapter and will not be redefined here.
[746] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 226.
[747] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 568.
[748] Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," 167.
[749] Ibid.
[750] Childs, likewise, would affirm this, stating that the sight verbs 'attempt to characterise this viewing as a special category of perception' (Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 507).

heightened in nature, especially as they see the unseen God and the glistening blue pavement of heaven itself. Not all agree with this perspective, positing that there 'is no significant difference between the meaning of the two verbs; the shift of verb is simply an elegant variation'.[751] However, I disagree. The text captures the extraordinariness of this encounter by using two different 'sight' terms that build the narrative's emphasis; the elders see someone and some place that no one ever sees, the God of Israel in the heavens. Thus, in trying to capture the sensation of seeing Yahweh, different verbs have been selected purposefully. Therefore, both the intense moment of seeing in the wilderness, as well as its transcendent impact, are portrayed.

#### *6.3.8.2 Clear Sight of God*

To continue, all seventy elders plus Aaron, Nadab and Abihu had the privilege of seeing God, and not just Moses. The Hebrew phrasing portrays the elders as having 'a direct perception of the Deity'.[752] The uninterrupted perception of God is astonishing,[753] as typically God is concealed in his coming, whether in cloud, smoke or fire. Hence, Brueggemann observes, 'There is no doubt that this testimony means to say that one of the characteristic markings of Israel is to be in YHWH's presence, to see God, to commune with YHWH directly, face to face'.[754] Furthermore, Nicholson observes that the text records 'in the most direct manner that they saw the God of Israel, it describes what they saw, it states that in spite of such an experience they remained unharmed and then it states again that they saw God. It is this that

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[751] Robinson, "The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24," 167.
[752] Dozeman, *Exodus*, 561.
[753] This is in contrast to the LXX translation that restricts the candour of sight, as the elders are described as seeing the place where God stood, not God directly.
[754] Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 30. Furthermore, as Brueggemann continues, 'This encounter at the mountain, moreover, is not instrumental, not for the sake of something else. It is a moment of wondrous abiding in the Presence' (Ibid.).

forms the bulk of the passage; it is this that all the emphasis is laid'.[755] Thus, in Israel's narrative and at this craggy wilderness mountain, God is profoundly revealed, seen and engaged as never before. God is open and uncovered, and permits the sight of himself to be seen by more people than just Moses. In this way, the description of God that incorporates elements of pureness, clarity and radiant gems, 'like sapphire', 'like the clear sky', aptly captures the nature of the divine and this awe-filled moment. However, it additionally, communicates 'the clarity of the sight' the elders were experiencing as they beheld God in this wilderness theophanic moment.[756]

The question remains however, what did the elders actually see? Answering this question is where the paradox lies, as the text remains quiet on the specifics of what God looks like. Instead, the narrator camouflages the description of God of Israel in 'the language of analogy and approximation'.[757] As Stuart states, 'They saw some sort of general shape that he allowed them to see vaguely … '[758] Similarly, Ryken comments that 'the Bible does not describe their vision of God at all. Nothing is said about the divine appearance'.[759] Maybe this is due to the metaphoric nature of prophetic sight. Further, Enns comments that the description seems to be incomplete, with the focus on what is beneath God's feet. He concludes by stating, 'But perhaps this is precisely the point'.[760] Additionally, the text itself is coy about the name of God. The elders are described as seeing 'the God of Israel' with restraint in using the

[755] Nicholson, "The Interpretation of Exodus XXIV 9-11," 93.
[756] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 227.
[757] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 442.
[758] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:556.
[759] Ryken, *Exodus*, 790.
[760] Enns, *Exodus*, 491.

divine name ‘Yahweh’, avoiding any anthropomorphism and reduction of the exclusive and holy name.[761]

The text maintains ambiguity in describing God. Yahweh remains concealed from us, the readers; yet not from the elders’ perception. This is the clear difference to previous theophanic encounters where God was physically hidden from everyone’s view by cloud and smoke, elders and readers alike.[762] In this encounter, the elders clearly see and behold God without artifice, but what they see is not relayed in the text.

#### *6.3.8.3 Summary*

In sum, this theophanic encounter concentrates on sight; this is where the perceptual emphasis is laid.[763] As a result, the focus on ‘seeing God’ augments the theory that the role of the wilderness setting aides such encounters due to perception being heightened in this space. The wilderness forms the perfect backdrop for a visual encounter. The wilderness fosters an acuteness of the senses, which enables one to see as they have not seen before, ראה and חזה. In addition, it likewise enables Yahweh to be revealed unlike never before in uninterrupted clarity.

### 6.3.9 Transcendence: Silence yet Seeing Heaven

Finally, Exod 24:9-18 is a profound and awe-filled encounter in the wilderness setting. Predominantly, this is due to the elders and Moses being depicted as seeing

[761] Robinson, “The Theophany and Meal of Exodus 24,” 161.
[762] Nicholson, “The Interpretation of Exodus XXIV 9-11,” 95.
[763] Ibid., 93.

God and into his heavenly residence, as well as dining with him. Further still, in response to the overwhelming visual experience, words fall silent. It is in this space—wild, intimate and silent—that rapture, awe and transcendence are experienced. This section will aim to discuss the transcendent experience of the wilderness theophanic encounter in Exod 24:9-18.

#### *6.3.9.1 Silence*

In the Exod 24:9-18 experience of God, with no words spoken and the visual perception amplified, it is clear that this is the culmination of the entire experience at Sinai.[764] Moses and the elders are definitively caught up beyond themselves as they behold, eat and drink with God here in the wilderness. So much so, that the event is crisply narrated, with no dialogue. This hints at the elusiveness of being able to describe the experience; language has reached its limits and subsequently, silent reverence is defaulted to. The elders and Moses are in awe and wonder at this sight; caught up in the holiness and rapture of the God of Israel. So much so, that silence resounds in the wilderness with the enormity of the moment. This is further enhanced by the fact that a meeting over a meal would typically encourage conversation and discussion, yet this wilderness engagement is narrated at the limits of language and respectfully quiet.

#### *6.3.9.2 Risky Sight*

Moreover, the Exod 24:9-18 encounter is filled with threat and risk for Moses and the elders. Typically, the direct sight of God results in death, as per Exod 33:20 ‘You

[764] Ibid., 96.

cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live'. Accordingly, some scholars will prioritise 33:20, stating that the elders did not see God directly. However, the very fact that God *did not* raise his hand against the elders implies that they did see God (24:11).[765] The riskiness of the event is in alignment with Savran's conclusions that the 'theophany is an elite experience of the divine, a visual encounter in which a chosen few are placed in great danger by their proximity to the divine, yet enjoy a extraordinary event'.[766] It is the heightened senses combined with the 'great danger' of God at the wilderness peak that makes this an exemplar transcendent moment. The elders are at their limits upon this wilderness mountain. They do not know whether they will live or die, as such their egos, self and any words are not narrated. Yet, the dangerous wild God is revealed and partakes with them. The paradox of threat and intimacy, death and dining subverts this encounter and confirms it as a climatic event in the lives of Moses and the elders, as well as Israel's history. Again, the wilderness setting of risk and beauty harnesses the uniqueness of the event and fosters its transcendence.

#### *6.3.9.3 Summary*

In sum, the Exod 24:9-18 theophany is a key transcendent experience with Yahweh. The silence in the wilderness pulsates with awe, respect and trepidation, marking this as a distinctive encounter with Yahweh. In addition, the elders risk themselves by their closeness to Yahweh and directly seeing him. The probability of peril, which the limits of the wilderness fiercely promote, intertwines in the encounter with Yahweh making this a summit event in the life of Israel.

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[765] Ryken, *Exodus*, 790.
[766] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 331.

### 6.3.10 Summary: Exodus 24:9-18

Overall, whilst this experience of Yahweh, Moses and the elders in Exod 24:9-18 is different to what has been previously seen in the Sinai theophanic event, the key principles are still at play. The wilderness setting fosters enhanced visual perception.[767] The awesome sight of Yahweh is naturally (or supernaturally) captured in the wild wilderness terrain, yet remains ambivalent and concealed from us who read the text. Indeed for the reader, the emphasis becomes on *where* God is, not *who* God is. Further, the limits of the characters are evoked, and due to the risky all-inclusive sight of Yahweh, words fail to be uttered or even comprehensively grasp the encounter with Yahweh. Through this, the wild, engaging and free nature of God is illustrated. Yahweh eats with his people, but is beyond borders, categories and even language; Yahweh cannot be reduced. Silence captures the encounter. Exod 24:9-18 is a magnificent and transformative moment of heightened senses and risky transcendence in the wilderness terrain.

## 6.4 EXODUS 33:18-34:8: EXPERIENCE AT THE ROCK

In the final section of this chapter, the examination of the heightened senses and transcendent engagement will continue in reference to Moses' theophanic experience

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[767] An additional example of sight perception is the culmination of this experience is for Moses to ascend further up the mountain and receive the two tablets of stone. In response to this the people of Israel at the bottom of the mountain are included through seeing the signs of the theophany, (Exod 24:17 'the sight of the glory of Yahweh was like a consuming fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the people of Israel'). The expression of the fire, glory of Yahweh and the cloud enveloping the mountain 'is the language of theophany', which is used to show that Israel is experiencing a continuity with the theophanic events of Exod 19-20 (Durham, *Exodus*, 3:346–347). Specifically, I would note that seeing the '*sight'* of the glory of Yahweh which is like fire, draws our minds back to Moses' curiosity in Exod 3:3, where he turns aside to 'see this great *sight'* a bush on fire that is not consumed. Likewise, Ancient Israel is caught up in seeing the great *sight* of the glory of God that is like 'a burning of fire'. In this way, the people of Israel are enveloped in Moses' experiences of Yahweh. The issue remains though, will they draw aside and recognise this theophany for what it is?

with God in Exod 33:18-34:8. This will be discussed in sections that draw together both the sensation and transcendence aspects of wilderness encounters, as it is difficult to separate these elements in this encounter. First, Moses' request to see God's glory will be considered. Second, the experience of Yahweh will be reviewed.

### 6.4.1 Seeking Yahweh's Visual Transcendence

Within the wilderness theophanies, at the burning bush and throughout the Sinai pericope, it has been illustrated that Moses' senses have been heightened and Yahweh has utilised this within the theophanic appearings. In Exod 33:18, it is now Moses who pushes his own sensual limits of perception and requests for another extraordinary experience of God. That is, Moses requests to not only 'see', but to see the 'glory of God' (33:18). Through this request, there is an intertwining of sensation—seeing and transcendence—the glory of God. It is proposed that the wilderness space, along with the previous encounters Moses has had with Yahweh, enable him to make this extraordinary request: 'to see the glory of God'. Therefore, I will now examine this request of Moses; an amplified visual and transcendent experience with Yahweh within the wilderness.

#### *6.4.1.1 Risky Sight*

In detailing the Exod 33:18-34:8 encounter with Yahweh, the biblical text is concrete and earthy in portraying Moses' request to see. However, it is the request to see the 'glory of God' that is risky and unexpected. Moses is asking to see something new, that is God's very self, and not the 'glory' he has previously seen in the cloud,

thunderbolt or flock of quail.[768] Hence, as Savran summarises, the 'appeal to a visual experience raises contact between Moses and Yahweh to a new level' and even though refused by Yahweh it 'points to an experience of much greater intensity than simply hearing the divine voice'.[769] Thus, Moses' wilderness request is both perilous and intimate, as previously it has always been Yahweh who initiates the theophany. Yet, Moses is appealing for a new experience with Yahweh. Even though it will not transpire as Moses proposed, a significant experience with Yahweh occurs.

#### *6.4.1.2 Sight Overlooked*

Moses requests a visual encounter with Yahweh. To unpack the implications of a heightened visual experience, it is firstly recognised that many scholars have removed the focus from the sense of sight. This is due to God's response to Moses, 'you cannot see my face … and live' (33:20). As such, commentators have focused toward what Moses heard or came to know or learned. For example, 'In the event itself, what Moses *saw* had less impact (34:5) than what Moses heard and experienced. The Lord stood there with him and spoke'.[770] Or 'any *seeing* that is granted to Moses must be accompanied by *knowing* if it is going to be truly revelatory of who God is and what God is about. It is more important to know what kind of God this is than to see that God'.[771] Stuart similarly agrees stating that 'the reader would be mistaken to assume that what Moses actually *saw* would be significant revelatory; it was rather what he *learned* through God's words that would most help him to understand that his request

[768] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 569.
[769] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 327–328. Savran also states, 'It is precisely because of the intensity of the visual encounter with the divine that the lethal potential of this experience is nearly always expressed in terms of seeing' (Ibid., 328).
[770] Bruckner, *Exodus*, 297 (emphasis original).
[771] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 299 (emphasis original).

… had indeed been granted'.[772] Finally, Durham adds, 'Yahweh does indeed come to Moses in theophany, what he gives to Moses is quite specifically *not* the *sight* of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a *description*, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but of how he *is*'.[773] Whilst I agree with the comments of these scholars, especially that the focus of the theophany shifts to what God says, I do not want to skim the fact that what Moses is requesting is to see[774] God's glory (33:18).

Moses' request to *see* God's glory in the wilderness space is still paramount. Moses is desirous to see God unveiled. 'Glory *for Moses* refers to the face/presence of God no longer enveloped by the cloud (cf. 16:10; 40:34) or the fire (see 24:17). This is a request to see God's very self'.[775] Therefore, as Moses is unveiled in the Book of Exodus when talking with God, Moses is likewise requesting God to come out from the cloud that hides him, so that Yahweh can be seen. Moreover, while the concept of *seeing* does encompass the semantic field of knowing and learning, the details of what Moses asked for is visual, to *see* God's glory.

Overall, the wilderness setting in its isolation, barrenness and marginal liminality is supportive for a request of astonishing unveiling to be uttered. As an unconventional place, the wilderness permits exceptional and risky appeals from humanity to the Divine. As such, the audacity of the request by Moses to ask for the unaskable, 'to see God's glory', as well as to engage with the heightened sensuality and transcendence

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[772] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:705 (emphasis original).
[773] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452 (emphasis original).
[774] This is conveyed in the *Hiphil Imperative* verbal form of ראה, which highlights the intensity and causative nature of the request. Thus, Moses cannot *see* God, unless God *causes* him to see.
[775] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 299 (emphasis original).

that the wilderness space fosters, are captured in this experience. Therefore, it is a perceptive request that Moses asks in this wild space.

#### *6.4.1.3 Sight Still Occurs*

To the request of seeing God's glory, however, God responds that Moses cannot *see* his face, for humanity cannot see God and live (33:20). Thus, even though Moses will not be able to *see* Yahweh's face, he will still *see.* In fact, Moses will be allowed to *see* God's back or back parts. We cannot discount that Moses did not see. Moses still did experience and even *see* something of God through his heightened senses, possibly as Alter states, the 'afterglow of the effulgence of His presence'.[776] But as this theophany is based on previous encounters with Yahweh, 'the visual element is of lesser importance' as it is not required to gain attention or foster curiosity.[777] Instead, 'the deeper communication is verbal' within this encounter.[778] Even so, as Moses daringly asks for a visual revelation, one that Yahweh is unwilling to give, I do not want to brush past any visual perception that Moses did experience.

Different scholarly perspectives come from the literary tension and strands in the passage, but Moses surely still saw something. Billings would argue that Moses' request to 'see God's glory' (33:18) is answered in verses 21-23.[779] As such, 33:19-20 are to be read as 'exegetical "commentary" on the theological content of the

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[776] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 506.
[777] Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," 128. In fact, it seems that the visual element plays an important role in the initial theophanies to attract attention and provide legitimacy, but the subsequent and deeper encounters are highly verbal (See Ibid., 130.).
[778] Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," 130.
[779] 'Three different expressions for the divine manifestation occur in these verses as well: God's glory (vv. 18, 22), God's "goodness" (v. 19), and God's "face/presence" (vv. 20, 23b)' (Rachel M. Billings, "The Problem of the Divine Presence: Source-Critical Suggestions for the Analysis of Exodus XXXIII 12-23," *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 4 [2004]: 440).

theophany. They answer the questions, "What does it mean to see God's glory? What is exactly Moses asking for?" They provide two answers, both of them de-anthropomorphizing'.[780] Thus, to see God's glory is, first, to hear God's name proclaimed of goodness and mercy, and second, to *not* see the face of God. These are the parameters of what it means for Moses to see God's glory, especially in light of the broken covenant of the previous chapters. However, despite this de-anthropomorphising commentary that is 'focused on the Lord's attributes rather than his appearance'[781] it is still inferred that Moses does see something. In fact, as Enns states,

> This is not to imply that God appears to Moses in bodily form, only that he sees something. If we dwell on what precisely Moses sees, we loose sight of the point of the story as a whole. No one knows what it means to speak of God's hand, back, and face, but perhaps this is precisely what is intended. God's appearance is a mystery, a mystery that even Moses himself is able to see only partially.[782]

Herein, the relationship between the senses and the transcendent elements of the encounter are fashioned. The enormity of the encounter is acute; something was seen, but what that was is difficult to articulate and mysterious in its outcome.

Further, it must not be forgotten that the verse 'does not say that God *cannot* be seen. Rather, it assumes that God can be seen, but one cannot live if this happens'.[783] Thus, the caveat of not fully seeing is for the protection of Moses' life, not to quarantine or safeguard God's visibility.[784] As Savran articulates, 'Divine incomparability and human frailty being what they are, seeing God is understood here as metonymic for the most powerful and intimate contact with the divine which the Bible can admit

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[780] Ibid., 441.
[781] Ibid., 444.
[782] Enns, *Exodus*, 583.
[783] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 300.
[784] Ibid.

to'.[785] This powerful and intimate contact is what cannot be overlooked here in the wilderness. This is not a doctrinal or abstract relationship enhancement that Moses is requesting, but he is asking for a deepening and expansion of the relationship he already has with Yahweh, that he would *see* God—unhidden and unveiled—for who Yahweh truly is. To me, it is no mistake that Moses is requesting this in the wilderness, as this is an environment that invites risky requests. Additionally, in the heightened sensation and isolation of the wild elements, it is a place that Moses can truly *see* and Yahweh be seen in return.

#### *6.4.1.4 Seeing Nothing: Experiencing God*

Overall, what Moses will see 'is a chance to sense God's glory visually—to see something so *splendid to behold*—the *best* thing he could possibly see as a human—that he would know without a doubt that it represented/manifest God's presence passing before him'.[786] However, due to being hidden in a cleft of the rock and covered by the hand of God, the reality is that Moses did not get to see much at all. In fact, what Moses did see was the glory of God passing by him 'so that he would realize he had actually perceived something of God's true, visible manifestation of himself (even if not of his full essence)'.[787]

The Hebrew idiom for seeing the back and not the face 'means, in effect, "to see nothing" or "to see virtually nothing"'.[788] To review the narration of God appearing to Moses; Yahweh descends in a cloud, stands with Moses on the rock, passes by him and proclaims his name (34:5-8). In this, there is no description or implicit

[785] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 329.
[786] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:706.
[787] Ibid., 2:709.
[788] Ibid.

commentary of Moses' *seeing*. In fact, Moses is depicted as responding to the event by bowing his head and worshipping (34:8), thereby, cutting off any visual perception altogether. Thus, the question is, did Moses *see* anything at all? It seems that the Hebrew idiom sums up the event well in that Moses saw virtually nothing, but instead experienced this encounter in all transcendence. This is what was viewed of paramount significance. Yahweh's back, Yahweh's hand, and the rocky heights of Sinai were all experienced.

#### *6.4.1.5 Summary*

Overall, the wilderness setting fosters an appeal from Moses to experience Yahweh in an encounter unlike any other. Moses asks to see God's glory; that is, Yahweh's very self. Yahweh entertains this and Moses is engaged in a truly transcendent experience. Whilst the experience does not play out as anticipated, as Moses does not see God directly with his eyes, Moses does still sense the presence of God passing by him from his station in the rocky cleft. In this manner, he participated in a mysterious transcendent experience with Yahweh, which can only be partially described. Yet this encounter's effects are fully captured within the wilderness setting that heighten the senses and allow for transcendent and inspirational moments to occur.

### 6.4.2 Experience of Yahweh: Aural and Non-Visual

Furthermore, in reviewing the experience within Exod 33:18-34:8, the encounter does not occur as per Moses' request, but rather the sensation that Yahweh utilises in his appearance is both aural and non-visual. This section will deliberate on the change of sensation modes, as well as Moses' non-visual and aural experience with Yahweh in the wilderness.

#### *6.4.2.1 Change of Perception Modes*

To commence, Moses requests to see the glory of God. Instead, God is described as proclaiming or calling out 'the Name' to Moses. The question one must ask at this point is (before discussing the specific mode of the encounter), did God change the primary medium by which this encounter occurs? Where Moses requests a visual element, God provides an auditory response as his primary mode of perception. While there is no one conclusion for why the mode of revelation of Yahweh to Moses is switched in the wilderness, there are a few possibilities.

Moses' experience with Yahweh follows the pattern of previous theophanies as articulated by Savran.[789] That is, the visual element typically precedes the auditory, and is utilised to foster attention in the initial theophany. Thus, for Moses who has already had two significant theophanic encounters with Yahweh (burning bush and Mount Sinai), he does not require a visual attention-grabbing theophanic experience. Instead, the dominant biblical position of perceiving Yahweh through hearing is what is prioritised in this encounter. As for ancient Hebrews, the verbal mode of communication is viewed as the most significant, as well as the most intimate.[790]

The visual sensation may be diminished in this encounter, due to Moses' human fragility, as typically, the biblical refrain is that one cannot see the fullness of God or they will die. Furthermore, the encounters with Yahweh are usually mediated through signs such as cloud, fire and smoke, which conceal the full revelation of Yahweh.

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[789] Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 326.
[790] Hence, why a whole chapter in this thesis (chapter 5) has focused on the words of Yahweh spoken in the wilderness.

Yahweh, therefore, maintains the sacred-profane, heaven-earth barrier and protects Moses from any harm that can occur when these barriers are crossed. In Exod 33:18-34:8, Yahweh's presence is once again obscured, for Yahweh passes by Moses so that Moses can only see the departing back of God. But this sight of God's back occurs through the hand of God that is covering Moses' position in the rock cleft. Thus, Moses can only glimpse, at best, the departing presence of Yahweh.

Further, the encounter occurs after the golden calf incident in Exod 32. Therefore, the main reason for why a visual encounter is denied could be due to the idolatry that has readily occurred within the camp of Israel. Yahweh does not want to be memorialised or reduced to gold, bronze or clay. As such, Yahweh remains aloof visually so that an image cannot be cast.

In sum, the theophanic encounter that Moses has with Yahweh modifies the perception from being visual. This could be due to the priority of speech within biblical theophanies, the danger to humanity with the crossing of sacred-profane barriers, and the reluctance of Yahweh to be reduced to an image. Instead, the encounter utilises other sensations within the wilderness setting.

#### *6.4.2.2 Hearing 'the Glory of God'*

The emphasis of the encounter in Exod 33:18-34:8 is on the speech of Yahweh and the experience of Moses. As after Moses' request to God to 'see his glory', the main focus of the passage becomes the speech of God and subsequently, on Moses'

listening.[791] This is due to God responding to Moses' request by stating that he will 'call out' or 'proclaim' in Moses' hearing, or literally in the 'presence of Moses', his Name (33:19).[792] Therefore, in this encounter, 'Moses must not simply use his eyes, he must use his ears to hear the *proclamation*'.[793] The focus turns therefore, to Moses hearing God proclaim or invoke or speak out aloud his own name.

The theophanic encounter utilises the auditory sense of Moses, and in the quiet of the wilderness setting this is undoubtedly intensified. Consequently, Stuart and most commentators conclude that what Moses would hear and experience is far more important than what he would see.[794] Specifically, what Moses would hear, is God invoking or calling his Name, a revelation of great significance.[795] This proclamation was so that 'Moses would know for certain with whom he was dealing and would not be subject to doubt that his eyes had played tricks on him'.[796] Hence, the words spoken are prioritised over any other sense in this encounter.

That Yahweh would choose once more to proclaim the message of the Name of God in the wilderness is significant. The wilderness, as the framework of this chapter acknowledges, has the ability to captivate the senses but also to promote awareness of a transcendent experience. Hence, the wilderness is able to contain a revelation of the divine name of Yahweh unlike any other setting. This is risky and wild. Significantly, it also builds on the previous words that Yahweh has spoken in the wilderness.

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[791] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 568.
[792] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452.
[793] Fretheim, *Exodus*, 299 (emphasis original).
[794] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:707.
[795] See #5.5.2.
[796] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:707.

In fact, the aural perception of the name of God being proclaimed in the wilderness in Exod 34:6-7 parallels the first encounter Moses had with Yahweh. In Exod 3:14, Yahweh reveals himself to Moses as 'I AM'. Now with 'Moses' request for a look at his Presence, Yahweh replied, "I will reveal to you what I *am*, not how I look." And in both instances, Yahweh followed his revelation with the calling out of his special name, "Yahweh."'[797] Thus, the focus of these two theophanic passages, that bookend Moses' encounters with Yahweh in the wilderness, prioritises auditory sensation. Moreover, the wilderness landscape is used as the setting to harness the voice of Yahweh and this revelation, due to its capacity to amplify sensations and capture the mystery of the divine.

#### *6.4.2.3 Experiencing the Non-Visual Yahweh*

A final point in reference to the Exod 33:18-34:8 encounter of Moses with Yahweh is that even though Moses did not explicitly *see* the glory of God, he did experience Yahweh physically in a mysterious transcendent manner. Although this encounter is brief in its description, a risky yet engaging experience occurs as depicted through God's goodness passing, as Moses remains concealed in the cleft of the rock. A distinct transcendental event occurs here in the wilderness.

Moses senses the presence of God when he is hidden in the rock while God's goodness passes by. This occurs, as Stuart states, 'mainly in nonvisual ways'.[798] In fact, this encounter engages sensations beyond the visual and auditory. This is indicated through the actions of the passing by of Yahweh, and Moses being hidden

[797] Durham, *Exodus*, 3:452.
[798] Stuart, *Exodus*, 2:706.

by the hand of God. Surely, in these two actions, Moses would have physically sensed the protection, concealment and even embrace of Yahweh. As well as the fear, risk and awesomeness that come with being in the presence, even the passing, and presumably fading, presence of the Divine. There is an increased sensual depth to the encounter through its physical outworking. So much so that Moses somehow 'perceived something of God's true, visible manifestation of himself (even if not of his full essence)'.[799] Therefore, I would argue, that Moses perceived something of God that goes beyond the speech of God through this action. In fact, this is why the moment is one of wonder and awe, as the speech and physical presence of Yahweh remove this event from the norm and transports it to being an extraordinary encounter. An encounter, which once again, the wilderness setting fosters and complements in creating space for both intimacy as well as awesome fear in the experience of divine Yahweh.

#### *6.4.2.4 Summary*

In sum, Moses appealed to Yahweh for a visual experience in the wilderness. Yet, Yahweh overturned this, instead providing an aural experience, wherein, Yahweh proclaimed his name and attributes. In this way, Yahweh displayed his wild authority. Most likely, the change in perception mode was due to the biblical priority of hearing the voice of God, the protection of Moses' human fragility from the glory of the divine, and the backdrop of the golden calf event. All in all, this experience is filled with transcendence as Yahweh directs it in an unexpected and unforseen manner, revealing his glory through speaking and passing by Moses, and ultimately being revealed to the deepest parts of Moses.

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[799] Ibid., 2:709.

### 6.4.3 Summary: Exodus 33:18-34:18

Overall, Exod 33:18-34:8 highlights another facet to the human experience of theophanic engagement with God in the wilderness. Moses, in the wilderness setting makes the risky petition to see the glory of God. Where else but the intensity of the wilderness could such a request be uttered, let along heard and responded to? Despite the specifics of the request being denied, Moses still experiences an incomparable encounter with Yahweh. An encounter beset with risk but full of unanticipated possibility, as God proclaims his divine attributes and opts to pass by Moses in his glory. In this way, once again, the wilderness setting augments the experience with Yahweh by adapting to the sensory change and underscoring its peril and transcendence. Yahweh, by comparison, is equally settled in the wild wilderness; transforming the encounter, grounding Moses on the rock, speaking into the silent echo, challenging Moses' perception of who he is, yet drawing near in inexplicable glory, grandeur and wonder. Therein, Yahweh uses the wilderness setting to full advantage.

## 6.5 SUMMARY: EXPERIENCING YAHWEH IN THE WILDERNESS

In conclusion, to resolve the thesis question 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' this chapter took a different approach. The approach was to consider the reception of Yahweh's wilderness appearance from the human perspective. That is, to explore whether the characters in the selected Exodus theophanic passages had an increased receptivity to an experience with Yahweh due to being located in the wilderness. This angle of exploration was based on the wider literature, within which there is an underlying assumption that humans are more attentive and responsive to

spiritual experiences in the wilderness landscape. Similarly, I conclude that the wilderness terrain in the four Exodus texts promoted (1) heightened senses and (2) an openness to a transcendent experience with Yahweh. Hence, playing a key role in why Yahweh has chosen to appear in the wilderness.

### 6.5.1 Heightened Senses

First, I would affirm that in the selected Exodus wilderness theophanies, the senses of the characters are heightened. In fact, the texts were overwhelmingly strewn with references to perception verbs. The characters see, hear and physically experience the encounter with Yahweh. The wilderness fosters a multi-sensory encounter with Yahweh.

Expressly, the sensation of sight is portrayed as sharpened in the wilderness. For example, in Exod 3:1-4:17, the encounter specifically hinges upon whether or not Moses will see beyond the general action of a shepherd's sight. Moses—out the back of beyond—looks, beholds and sees intently the great sight of the unconsumed fiery bush. Moreover, Yahweh is displayed as seeing Moses' actions and consequently draws near to speak to Moses. Indeed, Yahweh's senses are heightened in this narrative, beyond the geographical setting of the wilderness. Exod 19:1-20:21 narrates the key events via the action of seeing. That is, Israel was inundated through their senses and 'saw' the lightnings, clouds thunder and trumpet sounds. The whole experience is encapsulated via the visual sense, through which the text tries to capture the width and breadth of the sensual experience at the wilderness mountain. The elders' experience of Yahweh in Exod 24:9-18 is also viewed through heightened sight, as they both ראה and חזה God. The second verb especially shows that the sight

sensation was increased to an intense and even prophetic type of perception here in the wilderness. Finally, Moses requests to 'see' the glory of Yahweh in Exod 33:18-34:8, in the wilderness space where Moses knows that he can perceive in a heightened and uninterrupted manner. Yet, this direct sight of Yahweh is denied. Instead, a passing glimpse of Yahweh is what is experienced, and the emphasis is placed on another sense, the auditory.

The sense of hearing is overwhelmingly amplified in the wilderness, and typically, the mode in which theophanic encounters with Yahweh are cast. This is due to the emphasis on the words that Yahweh speaks, as detailed in chapter five, which is essential to ancient Israel's foundations. Hence, it is no surprise that in three of the four selected wilderness theophanic encounters, hearing is accented. Specifically, Moses at the burning bush hides his face from the visual sensations, and in turn, the text pivots to focus on hearing the voice of Yahweh. At Mount Sinai, the climatic point in the narrative is hearing the voice of Yahweh. The people have been brought into the wilderness to specifically hear and obey the voice of Yahweh, in an event that is interwoven with additional auditory noise via thunders, trumpet soundings and a ram's horn blast, all of which the motif of קול expresses. Yet vitally, the culmination of the encounter is that God answers Moses in a voice (קול), and consequently Moses hears Yahweh speaking. In the final seleted theophany, when Moses seeks to 'see' the glory of God, Yahweh switches the focus so that Moses instead 'hears' the glory of God via the proclamation of the divine name and attributes. Overall, the emphasis on the auditory sense by Yahweh in the isolated and forlorn wilderness is staggering, and highlights the influence of the words spoken for the community.

Finally, the physical engagement by the human participants within the theophanic encounters was enhanced through the wilderness landscape. Indeed, in these biblical encounters, the whole body, in all its senses was caught up in the experience of Yahweh. For example, Moses, through his bare footedness at the burning bush, not only honoured the presence of the Holy One, but also grounded himself into a larger (re)creational narrative. At Mount Sinai, physical boundaries were introduced so that the people did not force themselves through to the sacred ground without permission. Even so, they were asked to physically draw near to Yahweh in encounter. Moreover, the people are portrayed as trembling at the experience of Yahweh along with the Mountain itself. They cannot escape the engulfing effects of the experience of Yahweh. Yet, presumably due to being located in the fierce wilderness and with all the other sense being inundated, this was interpreted in a fearful and overwhelming manner. So much so, that after hearing the Ten Words declared, the people swayed away from Yahweh. Even so, the wilderness allowed for the full range of physical reactions of respectful awe, engagement, and fear.

In sum, it is clear that the senses of the characters, whether sight, hearing or physical sensations, were heightened in the wilderness theophanies. As such, this is arguably one of the reasons for why Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness setting.

### 6.5.2 Transcendent Experience

Second, the experience of Yahweh is clearly transcendent as Yahweh has appeared. But more so, Yahweh has appeared in a manner that is unpredictable, awe-inspiring and even threatening. All of which coalesced to foster an experience for the human characters that was transcendent; egos were abandoned, previously held perceptions

challenged and new possibilities imagined. A rapturous experience was encountered. Once again, the wilderness setting fittingly enabled an experience of rapture, awe and transcendence.

For example, Moses at the burning bush was confronted with signs to confirm his role as Yahweh's spokesperson. The rod turned into a wily snake, water into blood on dry land, and Moses' hand into snow-like, hornet-bitten leprosy. Through these signs, Yahweh confronted the doubt of Moses, and engaged with him in a transcendent experience. But herein, Yahweh also showcased his wild nature. Yahweh can antagonise and inflict, and change the unclean-holy parameters. Yahweh can transform even the wilderness for his purposes.

At Mount Sinai, the threat of Yahweh surrounds the encounter. The people are warned to create boundaries and to consecrate themselves, 'lest they die' in encountering Yahweh in an unprepared manner. The sensory assault is overwhelming, increasing the danger of death and fear of encountering Yahweh. So much so that the people cannot sustain the exposure to the sensory inundation of the experience including Yahweh speaking directly to them. Thus, they draw back to protect themselves from the full effects of engaging with transcendent Yahweh.

Further, in Exod 24:9-18, Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders are invited to dine with Yahweh and behold God directly. While narrated seamlessly, the threat of the risky sight of God tempers the whole experience. Further, the characters are all silent, indicating the enormity of the event, its wonder, trepidation and awe, as well as the sacred effect of limiting the character's ability to retell of their heavenly encounter.

Finally, in Exod 33:18-34:8 the risk of encountering Yahweh is especially highlighted. Moses desires to engage with Yahweh to 'see his glory' (33:18), a precarious and audacious question in itself. Yahweh responds to this request, yet changes the parameters of the expected encounter to an aural experience, accenting that if Moses saw Yahweh he would not live (33:20). Therein, Yahweh does not act in a tame manner, but displays his wild authority passing by Moses so that Moses experiences Yahweh in an ecstatic manner unlike anyone else.

In sum, the encounters of Yahweh in the wilderness setting within Exodus are indeed transcendent. Yahweh does not act as expected. Instead, the threat and risk, as well as exclusive intimacy of Yahweh are keenly displayed in the wilderness. In turn, the wilderness setting allows for these characteristics to be at the fore.

In conclusion, a vital reason for Yahweh choosing to appear in the wilderness is due to the wilderness setting's natural ability to foster spiritual experiences for humanity. The wilderness heightens the senses and fosters transcendence, both key aspects to encountering Yahweh.

# CHAPTER 7: YAHWEH IN THE WILDERNESS

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The wilderness, at first glance, is seemingly godforsaken. However, through a narrative-geographical reading of Yahweh's theophanies in the Book of Exodus, the wilderness setting is shown to be an excellent place for Yahweh to appear. Indeed, the wilderness is an ideal location for God to be revealed, as the space harnesses the revelations and signs of God's appearing (chapter four), enhances the new and astonishing words spoken by Yahweh (chapter five), as well as enables ancient Israel to perceive and experience Yahweh's appearance in an unmistakable manner (chapter six).

In this final chapter, I aim to draw together the findings of the separate chapters into an overall conclusion to the research question, 'why does Yahweh choose to appear in the wilderness?' In this respect, five overarching reasons will be developed. That is, Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness as this setting enables Yahweh to (1) be actively present and intimately engaged, (2) be separate and holy, (3) be paradoxically creative, (4) speak transformative and visionary words, and (5) be free, risky and provoking. Also, in the closing section of this chapter, I will provide recommendations for future research in combination with the implications of this research.

## 7.2 CONCLUSIONS: WHY DOES YAHWEH CHOOSE TO APPEAR IN THE WILDERNESS?

This thesis demonstrates clearly that Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness. Indeed, consistent themes have developed throughout all the chapters showing why the wilderness is a preferred setting for Yahweh to be revealed within the Book of Exodus. I will now tie these themes together to present five overarching key conclusions as to why Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness. These themes stand out due to their prevalence in the biblical narrative as well as their theological significance. However, due to the diversity of modes of appearance by Yahweh, the themes are not always characteristic of every biblical text examined. Instead, the five conclusions for Yahweh's preferred choice of appearing in the wilderness is representative of the key findings within the thesis.

First, I propose that Yahweh appears in the wilderness because in the wilderness Yahweh can be both actively present as well as intimately engaged. Second, the wilderness is an ideal place in which to be revealed, due to its separate nature and therefore it can harbour the presence of the Holy One. Third, Yahweh is paradoxically creative. As such the wilderness setting allows for the typical norms and conventions to be held in abeyance while Yahweh is present. Fourth, the wilderness setting is the ideal backdrop for transformative and visionary words to be declared in vigour. Finally, the wilderness is a place of wild people, who exhibit free, risky and even provoking actions. Yahweh, likewise, appears with these traits. Overall, the wilderness is an ideal setting for Yahweh to choose to appear, and I will now develop these conclusions in detail.

### 7.2.1 Actively Present and Intimately Engaged

First, I propose that the wilderness setting, with its fierce, isolated and marginal landscape, allows for Yahweh's appearance to be portrayed as both actively present as well as intimately engaged. Yahweh fosters a relationship with the people in the wilderness arena due to its particular geographical and figurative nature.

The first clear indicator of this conclusion, that Yahweh is actively present and intimately engaged, is that all the theophanies in the Book of Exodus occur in the wilderness setting. That is, those moments when God purposefully decided to draw close and engage directly with Moses, ancient Israel and/or the elders are in the abandoned wilderness. Therefore, Yahweh used the arid, barren, isolated and marginalised nature of the wilderness for his appearings. In sum, this is because the wilderness is quiet, enables focus with limited distractions, and heightens the senses to moments of transcendence. The wilderness is also a threatening liminal place, on the borders of culture, religion and society, with its risky and fearsome landscape and wild inhabitants. These aspects all coalesce to craft the wilderness as both a place of active presence but also intimate engagement with Yahweh.

A clear way that God's active and intimate engagement is illustrated in the wilderness setting is through the revelation of the 'I AM' name.[800] In the wilderness, God chose to be revealed, like never before, stating that he is the 'I AM'. This new revelation of God's nature and essence, encapsulated in his 'I AM' name, provides a new commitment and an intimate glimpse of God. Yahweh's name was conveyed in the rare form of a verb, which strongly invites us to see God as actively present. God is

[800] This was detailed in section #5.2.1, #5.3.2 and #5.5.2.

the present, existing and creative one. Yahweh is revealed within the wilderness by being portrayed as present for Israel, by saving, speaking, providing and guiding them. The revelation of the active and intimately revealed name of God is a recurring theme in all the appearances.

Further, God appears in the wilderness so that ancient Israel could hear his voice directly and remain focused on him exclusively.[801] In the wilderness alone, this direct speaking of the Law to ancient Israel—a rare event—occurs. God is candidly and exclusively engaging with the people. This direct speech of Yahweh, especially in the Ten Words, becomes central to the identity of ancient Israel. Further, direct speech always reveals the character of the speaker.[802] Thus, via this act, Yahweh is intimately disclosing to the people who he is. Moreover, in the wilderness setting, the words resound out and are heard by all. Yahweh talks directly to all the people and not just the elite or spiritually tasked ones. By choosing to directly speak these words in the wilderness, Yahweh personally invites the people to know who he is.[803] In this manner, barriers that might be present in other settings, either through religion, tradition or society, are not impediments in the wilderness. This is a liminal space, in which Yahweh fosters the transition of the people from Egyptian slaves to Yahweh's unique treasure, royal priesthood and holy nation.[804]

Similarly, Yahweh's intimate presence is especially on view in Exod 24:9-18 and 33:18-34:8. In these encounters, Yahweh appears anthropomorphically.[805] By

[801] See #5.3.1.1.
[802] See #5.3.2.2.
[803] See #5.3.2.3.
[804] See #5.3.3 and #5.3.4.
[805] See #4.3.6, #4.4.1, #4.4.2, #4.4.3, and #4.4.4.

appearing in this manner, Yahweh shows himself in a fresh and accessible way. For example, in Exod 24:9-18, God descends to be seen by the elders of Israel. In Exod 33:18-34:8, Moses requests an appearance of God, and God responds by covering Moses with his hand, passing by Moses so that God's back is glimpsed but his name and divine attributes are called out. Each theophanic encounter shows a new activity of Yahweh, and subsequently, an increased intimate glimpse into his character.

In addition, the wilderness setting is a landscape that has an affinity for spiritual encounters, because the people's senses are heightened and because wilderness is a liminal space.[806] Yahweh is portrayed as utilising the wilderness space to its full advantage, by sensually engaging the people in a unique manner to enable a transcendent encounter.[807] In this way, God is not aloof or far-off. Instead, Yahweh is seeking the attention of the people, presenting himself as intimately near via multivalent signs and desirous of the people drawing close. Sometimes, this nearness is to the point of overwhelming the senses, but nevertheless, Yahweh is actively pursuing an encounter with the people and is not distant from them.

Overall, it is clear that the wilderness is an ideal landscape in which Yahweh can be actively present and intimately engaged.

### 7.2.2 Separate and Holy

Second, in the isolation and solitude of the wilderness setting, the holiness and separate nature of Yahweh are accentuated. Even though God is present and

[806] See #2.3.8.
[807] See #6.1.1.

intimately engaged, the wilderness setting is also chosen by Yahweh because it encourages awe, announces fierce holiness, and displays the obscurity and separateness of God's appearances. Moreover, the wilderness promotes the separation of the people from their normal sphere of activities. Once again, the wilderness setting instinctively illustrates and expands on this facet of the nature of Yahweh. In every encounter with Yahweh within Exodus, there was a degree of separation or prepared consecration displayed, not only regarding ancient Israel's actions, but also in regards to the land's involvement in the encounter.

I suggest that the foreboding landscape of the wilderness captures the risk as well as the beauty of holiness, unlike any other landscape.[808] Holiness is not static or contained. Neither is the wilderness. Drawing near to the Holy One calls for awe, respect and fear. Likewise, to survive for any length of time in the wilderness; awe, respect and fear of the natural elements is required. Further, holiness is a foundational aspect of encountering Yahweh. Thus, by linking Yahweh's holiness with the wilderness setting, Yahweh's transformative engagement with places of god-forsakenness and chaos is showcased.[809] The chaos and fierceness are not off-putting, but rather, are inviting and characteristic of holiness, as the presence of the Holy-One transforms. There is a resonance between the wilderness and facets of holiness.

Particularly, in the selected texts, Exod 3:5 portrays the ground as holy, where God keenly requests Moses to remove his sandals, as the place where he was standing was

[808] See an article I wrote (under my maiden name) that interacts further with the concept that the wilderness is the innate habitat for Yahweh in his holiness. Narelle Melton, "Wilderness: Holy Yahweh's Innate Habitat?," in *A Future for Holiness: Pentecostal Explorations*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Cleveland, Tennessee: CPT Press, 2013), 9–23.
[809] See #2.3.7.

literally ‘a ground of holiness’.[810] In the Sinai encounter (Exod 19 onwards), there are clear demarcations of consecration, in both the land and people.[811] Expressly, barriers are used to outline the holiness of the mount and to prevent people from touching the holy land without authorisation. Further, the people consecrate themselves by remaining pure, washing their clothes and heeding the barriers until they are given permission to ascend the mountain. All of this alerts us to the profound transcendence of the encounters, but also suggests that the wilderness is a liminal site of encounter, transformation and conversion with the Holy.

Furthermore, the wilderness setting alerts the reader to the separation of the characters from their normal sphere of activity. They are out the back of beyond, from Moses at the burning bush being ‘out the very back’ (אחר) of the wilderness,[812] ancient Israel being purposefully led through the wilderness away from the domineering civilisation of Egypt,[813] to Moses and the elders ascending Mount Sinai beyond the campsite[814] and Moses to a ‘place’[815] and rock on the Mount.[816] The characters are separated from their normal social-cultural-political-religious territories. This, I contend, allowed for an authentic transformative experience. Moreover, the physical and spatial separation of the event speaks to the ‘mystery and sanctity’ of the encounters, thereby enhancing their transcendence.[817] In such a way, especially the Sinai sojourn could be viewed as

[810] See #3.2.4.
[811] See #3.3.3.
[812] See #3.2.1.
[813] See #3.3.1.
[814] See #3.3.2.3.
[815] See #3.4.1.
[816] See #3.4.2.
[817] Savran, “Theophany as Type Scene,” 127.

an extended Sabbath-holiness time.[818] Overall, Yahweh exclusively uses the isolation and barrenness of the wilderness to promote holiness, transcendence and intimacy.

On the point of separation and isolation, the signs that Yahweh uses to be revealed in the wilderness also illustrate his preference for obscurity. In this way, Yahweh is partially revealed yet still concealed.[819] For example, Yahweh's presence is clearly discerned within the sign of a flame or thick cloud, but the fullness of a revelation of Yahweh is hidden. Ultimately, this highlights Yahweh's holy-other character and the reality that God cannot be presumptuously accessed. There are still precautions to be taken when experiencing God, and Yahweh remains partially concealed to protect the sacred-profane barrier. In this way, Yahweh is elusive and unpredictable, requiring thoughtful preparation and not a hasty engagement. The edginess of the wilderness setting and its obscurity effectively coincide to illustrate this aspect of Yahweh.

Holiness is a key theme in the wilderness encounters with Yahweh, as the raw and wild holiness is meant to pervade the people's experiences and the entire earth. They are interacting with holy Yahweh, and they are to be his holy people. In this liminal wilderness place, they (re)claim this identity and allow Yahweh's holiness to pervade everything that they do.[820] Within their experience of the craggy and fierce outpost, the beauty and riskiness of the wilderness infuse with their perception of what holiness is. Holiness is both awesome and inviting. In the wilderness, a foundation of holiness is fostered, which is ultimately seen within the Tabernacle Laws and

[818] See #3.3.4.
[819] See #4.5.2.
[820] See #5.3.4.4.

Holiness Code of Leviticus, that the people take as they move from the crucible of the wilderness to their landed settlements.

In sum, the wilderness is chosen as a place for Yahweh to appear as it is separate and can portray the characteristics of Yahweh's awesome and inviting holiness.

### 7.2.3 Paradoxically Creative

A third key aspect regarding Yahweh's appearance in the wilderness that emerged throughout this study was the multivalency of the signs Yahweh used. The stock images are expanded, multi-layered or even repositioned in the wilderness setting. Therefore, to appear in the setting of the wilderness results in Yahweh having a wider scope of creativity with which another setting potentially could not cope.

Indeed, in all the times that Yahweh appears in the wilderness within the Book of Exodus, he remains paradoxically creative. As the thesis has portrayed, Yahweh appears in our first passage in the images of an unconsuming fire, a scrub bush, and/or a tree of life.[821] Clouds,[822] fire, smoke,[823] thunders and lightnings,[824] and trumpet blasts[825] accompany the second theophanic encounter. The third appearance was the feet of Yahweh viewed through the pure, clear and sapphire-like heavenly pavement.[826] The final encounter is altogether different as Yahweh is revealed anthropomorphically via a back,[827] hand[828] and the motion of passing by.[829] No

[821] See #4.2.1.
[822] See #4.3.4.
[823] See #4.3.1.
[824] See #4.3.2.
[825] See #4.3.3.
[826] See #4.3.6.
[827] See #4.4.4.

appearance in any of these wilderness encounters by Yahweh is the same, and no appearance predictable.

Moreover, Yahweh chooses to be revealed in multiple forms, which are multi-layered,[830] tangible and concealing.[831] God is in control of the way and manner that he appears. The wilderness setting is preferred, I propose, for this setting allows for many different expressions. God is free to be authentic but not confined to the expected norms of behaviour. Furthermore, the experience of Yahweh is engaged in a multiplicity of creative ways through the heightened senses. No encounter is like the other. Further, the wilderness is a place where you expect to engage with the transcendent.[832] The transcendent is rarely predictable, and thus once again, the unpredictable nature of the wilderness allows for Yahweh to be wildly who he wants to be.

Even so, while God appears in the wilderness in paradoxically creative ways, there is an undergirding mystery, elusiveness or even darkness to these appearances. While Yahweh is revealed with tangible signs, they do not contain God. Sometimes, Yahweh is fully concealed in flame or thick cloud or even thunder. At other times, Yahweh is more directly revealed via anthropomorphic signs. The appearances are never the same, and they are not what is expected. This is especially portrayed in Exod 33:18-34:8, as Moses requests one thing (to see God), but receives a different encounter altogether (God passing by).

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[828] See #4.4.2.
[829] See #4.4.3.
[830] See #4.5.1.
[831] See #4.5.2.
[832] See #6.1.1.

In sum, I would propose that the wilderness setting allows for variety and creative paradox in the appearance of Yahweh, due to the changeable and drift-nature of the wilderness setting. Hence, this is another reason as to why Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness.

### 7.2.4 Transformative and Visionary Words

Fourth, I would argue that the wilderness setting allows for the message/s that Yahweh delivers to go beyond normal bounds. The words spoken are transformative and visionary. Yahweh uses the liminal characteristic as well as the barrenness of the wilderness space to posit a new identity for the people, cast vision for the future of Israel as well as initiate God's ideals for the entire earth. Furthermore, Yahweh uses the heightened senses the wilderness setting creates to increase the people's receptivity to the words that will inculcate new vision and identity.

Unmistakably, the thesis has shown that unexpected words are spoken in the wilderness. That is, the messages are either at odds with the setting or that spoke to a future that was not visible or even imaginable at the time it was articulated. For example, Yahweh's messages include a vision of a land of milk and honey,[833] the revelation of God's personal name,[834] or even a whole earth vision that God has for Israel that incorporates a new identity for Israel.[835] However, due to these words being spoken in the wilderness setting, greater depth and intensity is created by the juxtaposition. That is, the land of milk and honey is all the more vivid and fruitful by

[833] See #5.2.2.
[834] See #5.2.1.
[835] See #5.3.4.

comparison to the arid and desolate wilderness. The revelation of God's name 'I AM' that we defined intrinsically as the present one who will be all Israel needs is revolutionary in light of the barren wilderness and Israel's salvific needs. The whole earth vision can hardly be handled in the obscurity of the wilderness since the people are just newly free, have not known anything except the oppression of Egypt and do not possess any land yet.[836] It appears that the backdrop of the barren and marginal wilderness allows for anything to be feasible, as the people's imaginations run wild, and Yahweh's transformative words inspire hope and future possibilities.[837]

Yahweh speaking transformative words in the wilderness also ties into the wider biblical narrative motif of Creator God, who transformed the chaos (תהו ובהו) of pre-creation into the form and order of creation. Therefore, in the Exodus accounts, once again, Yahweh is displayed as transforming the chaos—of the wilderness—into beauty and a place of visionary expectation through his words.[838] The backdrop of the wilderness displays Yahweh's marvellous ability to convert disorder, and therefore, the words carry an increased weight.[839]

Moreover, the wilderness is the only setting where Yahweh speaks directly to the people and not via a mediator or prophet.[840] This indeed is significant, for out of all the different geographical places God could have used to speak directly, the unique characteristics of the wilderness are preferred. I commend that the wilderness'

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[836] See #5.3.5.
[837] Indeed, as I have commented elsewhere, Yahweh 'is not fearful or constrained by remote, isolated, and formless landscapes. In fact they arguably become the innate landscape which best displays his creative and redemptive acts, as well as his other, holy, and fearsome, but sustaining nature' (Melton, "Wilderness: Holy Yahweh's Innate Habitat?," 22–23).
[838] See #5.3.1.2.
[839] See #5.6.2.
[840] See #5.3.1.

barrenness, isolation and marginalisation, particularly enables Yahweh to speak profound transformative words that promote his exclusive demands,[841] dynamic engagement with the people,[842] as well as intimate involvement.

In addition, the wilderness setting heightens the people's receptivity to the words spoken. Thus, Yahweh in choosing to cast a transformative vision and to speak directly in the wilderness utilises the landscape's natural affinity to enhance the senses as well as to foster the transcendence of the experience. Through the heightened senses an unforgettable experience with Yahweh is created. The words spoken take on prophetic and revolutionary meanings, which may have otherwise been lost in another setting.

Therefore, Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness because the wilderness is an ideal backdrop to highlight the exceptionally transformative and visionary words spoken.

### 7.2.5 Free, Risky and Provoking

Finally, in all of the encounters, there is an undertone of 'wildness' regarding Yahweh's behaviour, speech and actions. Yahweh is portrayed as free, risky and provoking. Yet again, the wilderness is the apt setting for this, with the encounters occurring in the wilderness setting, the fierceness and threat of the landscape cannot be escaped. Equally, these characteristics are true of Yahweh—free, risky and provoking—and glimpsed within the Exodus wilderness appearances.

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[841] See #5.3.1.1.
[842] See #5.3.1.3.

Yahweh is portrayed as free in the wilderness, as the wilderness space does not contain him. Instead, the drift-land boundaries, the way that Yahweh can perceive the landed and wilderness arenas, as well as the ability to come and go, all indicate Yahweh's freedom. Furthermore, Yahweh is clearly in control of the encounters, freely directing the action and appearing at his discretion, with signs of his own choosing. Moreover, by freely appearing and speaking within the wilderness, Yahweh uses this freedom to show that what is revealed in this setting will be universally known. Thus, the obscure and chaotic wilderness space allows for Yahweh's freedom and control to be highlighted.

Moreover, there is risk and tension in how Yahweh is revealed in the wilderness. For example, Yahweh appears in flames yet waits to be recognised at the burning bush by Moses before engaging further.[843] Or in the unveiling of his personal name, Yahweh invites risk and vulnerability into the relationship,[844] as God's name, once known, could now be abused. Further, Yahweh's method of revealing his name, as per the *idem per idem,* shows that God is clearly in control as he silences Moses.[845] There is risk, indeterminacy and vulnerability in this encounter. Moreover, the signs that Yahweh uses to confirm Moses' calling are not tame. They could even be seen as provoking; rod turned to snake, hand turned leprous, and water turned to blood.[846]

Furthermore, by bringing the people into the wilderness for an exclusive encounter at the fierce Mountain of Sinai, God is clearly pushing the people to their limits and

[843] See #6.2.1.1 and #6.2.1.4.
[844] See #5.2.1.5.
[845] See #5.2.1.5.
[846] See #6.2.4.

requesting that the people rely directly on him alone. The threat of death by crossing the mountain holiness barriers, plus the sensory overload of the signs, all coalesce to create an alarming and perilous experience where the people clearly recognise that Yahweh cannot be contained or managed.[847] He is fearsome, risky and even provoking; hence, they choose to stand back and ask Moses to mediate.[848]

In  24:9-18, the experience of seeing God cannot even be grasped or communicated clearly. The elders, Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu see the God of Israel, and even a glimpse of heaven itself. This was a profoundly engaging, yet potentially hazardous time, as they climbed past Sinai's holy barriers.[849]

Finally, in the last encounter (Exod 33:18-34:8), Yahweh acts and speaks at cross-purposes with Moses' bold requests to see God face to face.[850] Further, the threat of death hovers, for if Moses sees God's face, he will perish. Instead, the encounter occurs 'backwards', as Yahweh passes by Moses and proclaims his name and attributes. This encounter was risky, for just like the Passover event in Egypt, God's passing could either kill or save.[851] God is portrayed as the dangerous one in this wilderness encounter.

The fierce and intense landscape of the wilderness captures the precariousness of Yahweh's theophanies. The wilderness, in its isolated, barren, arid and marginal nature, is *wild* in every way, beyond human management and control. Similarly, it is

[847] See #6.3.3.1, #6.3.4 and #6.3.5.
[848] See #6.3.2.1 and #6.3.5.2.
[849] See #6.3.8 and #6.3.9.2.
[850] See #5.5.1.
[851] See #4.4.3.

clear that 'God cannot be *had* … [whether] by concept, language or experience. God is a desert, ultimately beyond human comprehension'.[852] Yahweh, thus, is like the wilderness in his appearings; free, risky and even at times provoking. Moreover, the wilderness setting perfectly exhibits this characteristic of Yahweh in juxtaposition with the other characteristics previously described.

### 7.2.6 Summary: Wild God in the Wilderness

In conclusion, the *wildness* of the wilderness landscape is a natural backdrop for Yahweh to appear, as in many ways the wilderness represents and characterises Yahweh. Indeed, the wilderness is a setting that enables God to be actively present and intimately engaged with people. The wilderness in its isolated, raw and fierce landscape separates the people from the everyday and social-cultural-religious traditions. In this manner, it creates space for the people to engage with God but also becomes a space that the holy presence of Yahweh is fiercely illustrated. Further, the wilderness setting allows Yahweh to be paradoxically creative, with many different signs that never appear in the same manner. Further, the silence and receptivity of the wilderness alongside the barren chaos enables transformative and visionary words to be spoken, heard and imagined in wonderful vividness. Finally, the wilderness setting in its fierceness and awesome beauty becomes a place where God's freedom, and his risky and even provoking nature is allowed to thrive. Like the wilderness, Yahweh is beyond human domestication.

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[852] Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 12 (emphasis original).

Overall, Yahweh is a wild God in the wilderness. Without a doubt, God 'is one who thrives on fierce landscapes'.[853] Therefore, for the aforementioned key reasons, I conclude that Yahweh chooses to appear in the wilderness very purposefully. Indeed, like Brueggemann states, the 'Wilderness and Yahweh belong to each other. As Yahweh's presence transforms wilderness, so wilderness suggests the peculiar mode and parameters of Yahweh's presence'.[854] I agree that the wilderness showcases Yahweh seamlessly.

## 7.3 REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With any research project, there are many limitations, for various reasons, but these prove grounds for future research. From this thesis, there are many avenues for future research and contemporary reflection. In the subsequent discussion, I aim to provide an overview of some areas that may be useful for future exploration and research.

First, a suggested area for future research is to examine the appearance of Yahweh in the wilderness with Beck's narrative-geographical methodology, yet expanding the focus to other passages beyond the Book of Exodus. This will highlight whether or not the findings of this thesis that focused on the narrative of the Book of Exodus can extend to other narratives. For example, ideal passages to consider would include God's wilderness appearance to Hagar (Gen 16; 21) or Elijah (1 Kgs 19). In addition, it would be worthwhile to extend the study to other genres, especially the OT prophetic or wisdom literature (for example Isa 32:1-2; 35:1-2; 41:17-20 or Job 38),

[853] Ibid., 43.
[854] Brueggemann, *The Land*, 40.

to elucidate if in different books with different authors and genres, the portrayal of Yahweh in the wilderness is similar or whether there are unique differences?

Second, I would recommend a comparative study on the nature of theophanic appearances of Yahweh in the wilderness versus an urban or agricultural setting. Throughout the thesis, I propose that it is the setting of the wilderness that allows Yahweh to be illustrated in a uniquely free way. However, is there a different portrayal of Yahweh in an urban setting? Is the portrayal of Yahweh in tune with expected social norms and thus, more confined and restricted in that setting? Hence, is this why Yahweh chooses to predominantly appear within the wilderness setting?

Third, due to space limitations, I have not been able to engage the specific manner of the portrayal of Yahweh in the wilderness and what new meanings this could foster for contemporary spirituality. The depiction of Yahweh in this space is vast and wild. What are the theological implications of this? Indeed, the picture of Yahweh may not be the image that many contemporary Christians are comfortable with; for the portrayal of Yahweh is not entirely explainable or predictable. Instead, Yahweh is multivalent and sometimes provoking in the marginal wilderness space. In light of this study, where Yahweh is separate and holy, paradoxically creative, free, risky and provoking, could our modern-day theological representation of Yahweh incorporate these ‘wilder’ aspects?

Moreover, within my tradition of Pentecostalism, there is a large emphasis on encounter.[855] Indeed, it has been stated that 'the aim of Pentecostal spirituality is to experience encounter with God'.[856] Likewise, Neumann observes that 'Pentecostalism cannot be rightly understood without an appreciation of the weight granted to encounters with the Spirit as a resource for theological reflection, even if it is not always being done self-consciously by Pentecostals'.[857] Thus, I suggest that there is room for greater research into what the findings of this thesis could add to the discussion of the presence and encounter with God, especially from a Pentecostal point of view. Expressly, what does it mean to encounter a 'wild God'? And how could the Pentecostal language of testimony and faith allow room to articulate the unusual, dramatic and riskiness of such encounters?

Fourth, I propose that this study could also intersect with the research of those who discuss finding God in the geographical places of abandonment, suffering or even non-places[858] (as we loose our sense of rootedness). As one of the portrayals of the wilderness in the biblical text is as a place of ultimate chaos, that is, as a cursed, isolated and non-place. Could this landscape and the narratives therein, of geographical exile, wilderness wandering as well as encounters with Yahweh be utilised to inform the portrayal of God in similar modern-day landscapes of wilderness, such as exile, war and suffering? Does Yahweh appear similarly in these geographical places today? The Holocaust or the exile event of refugees may be a

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[855] For example, see Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (London: T & T Clark, 2008); Grace Milton, *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion: A Practical-Theological Study* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015); Peter D. Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 187 (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012).
[856] Milton, *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion*, 101.
[857] Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience*, 331.
[858] See, for example, Burton-Christie who discusses the concept of a sense of place from a theological perspective (Burton-Christie, "A Sense of Place").

potential starting place to discuss the experience of devastating geographical chaos in light of the theological reflections of God's presence.[859]

In addition, Christians figuratively refer to experiencing 'wilderness' periods when they face the seeming absence of God during times of illness, suffering or grief. I propose that some of the findings of this study could transform how these times are discussed. That instead of the 'wilderness experience' being viewed one dimensionally as just a negative and chaotic space, could the more positive aspects of the wilderness be regained? That is, to depict how God seemingly prefers to appear within the wilderness? Thus, could times of devastation be re-imagined to liminal places of encounter?[860] This could potentially recreate an awareness of Yahweh in the specific wilderness-landscapes of one's life.[861]

Fifth, there has been research conducted into the benefits of being in nature, wilderness and other natural terrains and its role in spirituality. Typically, these studies occur from a practical theological, spirituality or personal memoir perspective.[862] However, I propose that biblical scholarship, such as this study, could

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[859] For example, Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973); Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Holocaust Theology: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2002); Steven T Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, *Wrestling with God Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Tod Linafelt, ed., *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible After the Holocaust* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, *The Holocaust as Interruption* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

[860] See, for example, Franks and Meteyard, "Liminality."

[861] There is also other work that has begun to engage with the concept of the Church being 'on the margins' in post-modern society, and thus, experiencing figuratively a wilderness-like time. See for example David Cleaver-Bartholomew, "First Testament Wilderness Traditions and the Contemporary Church," *International Congregational Journal* 10, no. 1 (2011): 29–46; Terence E. Fretheim, "Leading from the Wilderness," *International Congregational Journal* 10, no. 1 (2011): 15–28.

[862] See for example, Heintzman, "The Wilderness Experience and Spirituality"; Steve Hollenhorst, Ernest Frank III, and Alan Watson, "The Capacity to Be Alone: Wilderness Solitude and Growth of the

ground these reflections. A spiritual experience with Yahweh in the wilderness could be guided through the biblical text anchoring, reinforcing and providing models of the modern day experience. That is, the wilderness-spiritual experience is not just an isolated personal event but is part of a larger narrative and experience.

Overall, there are many new avenues of research into which the work of this thesis could venture. In sum, new research could include further biblical scholarship using Beck's methodology, comparative studies between biblical urban and wilderness settings, the theological implications of Yahweh's appearance in the wilderness, application to the experience of 'wilderness' both geographical and figuratively, as well as developing tighter connection between wilderness, spiritual experience and the biblical text.

## 7.4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the unique narrative-geography approach of considering wilderness theophanic passages within the Book of Exodus has added distinctive insights to existing scholarship, as well as provided many avenues for future research. Overall, the wilderness is a very apt landscape in which Yahweh appears. I, therefore, conclude: in the wilderness, Yahweh is a wild God.

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Self," in *International Wilderness Allocation, Management, and Research*, ed. John C. Hendee and Vance G. Martin (Fort Collins, CO: International Wilderness Leadership (WILD) Foundation, 1994), 234–239; Johnson, "On the Spiritual Benefits of Wilderness"; Kaye, "The Spiritual Dimesion of Wilderness"; Belden C. Lane, "Backpacking with the Saints: The Risk Taking Character of Wilderness Reading," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2008): 23–43; Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*; John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911); Martha Robbins, "The Desert-Mountain Experience: The Two Face of Encounter with God," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 35, no. 1 (1981): 18–35; Luci Shaw, "Taming the Wilderness? Order, Chaos, Poetry, and God," *The Reformed Journal* 40, no. April (1990): 11–16; Van Gelder, "At the Confluence of Paradox"; Richard W. Voss, "Raspberry-Picking, Wild Places, and Redemption," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 47, no. 2 (1993): 97–98.

# APPENDIX 1: WILDERNESS: DEFINITIONS AND ANCIENT ISRAEL'S GEOGRAPHY

This appendix will discuss the seven related synonyms of the Hebrew term מדבר to understand how the biblical text understands wilderness and its referents. Second, it will provide an overview of the wilderness geography of the land of Ancient Israel, in relation to five different regions. This is to gain insight into the specific 'place' in which the biblical text is cast and shaped by, as well as to follow the methodology of Beck, whereby the formal geographical elements of the biblical text are elevated.

## A. WILDERNESS: ADDITIONAL LEXICAL SYNONYMS

First, in the biblical canon there are many Hebrew terms that are found in connection with מדבר. To augment the picture of wilderness in the Old Testament (OT) it is necessary that these terms be considered briefly (not exhaustively). They include (i) ערבה, (ii) ישימון, (iii) חרב and חרבה, (iv) בקק, (v) תהו and בהו, (vi) ציה and ציון, and (vii) שממה.

### i. ערבה

First, as a common noun, ערבה is often used as a synonym for מדבר. The term occurs 59 times in the OT.[863] In general, it refers to any dry stretch of land, scrubland, steppe, regions with saline soil or little vegetation, and can be populated by dangerous wild

[863] Of these 59 occurrences, the term ערבה appears 7 times in *parallelismus membrorum* with מדבר, 6 of those as the second member (only once in the reverse order Jer 17:6). (Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 93).

animals.[864] In comparison to מדבר, the term ערבה is used to describe the negative aspects of wilderness, whereas the positive references linked to מדבר of 'grazing land' or 'drift' are not found. [865] Like מדבר the term also describes general geological-geographical aspects, especially the 'the historico-geographical experience of the wilderness wanderings' as detailed in the Book of Numbers.[866] The use of ערבה as a proper noun will be discussed in the following section #B.2.

**ii. ישימון**

Second, ישימון is usually defined as 'desert' or 'waste' or 'wilderness'. It is derived from the root ישם, to 'be desolate, ruin'.[867] Specifically, the root is 'concerned with the desert land around the Dead Sea, the Negeb, and the Sinai'.[868] The term ישימון occurs 13 times within the OT in connection or parallel with מדבר and ערבה, usually as an appellative and never with the definite article.[869] These occasions are mainly confined to specific desert locations within the wilderness wandering narratives, in reference to the past wilderness tradition and the future anticipation of the desolate places being transformed.[870]

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[864] David R. Seely, "Arabah," ed. David Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York ; London: Doubleday, 1992), 322.; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 949. K.A. Kitchen, "Wilderness," ed. John Bimson, *Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Places: Towns & Cities, Countries & States, Archaeology & Topography* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House Co., 1995), 308.
[865] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 93.
[866] Ibid.
[867] John E. Hartley, "Yāsham," ed. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 413.
[868] Ibid.
[869] Further, ישם and its derivatives occur 18 times within the biblical text. For example, Num 21:20, 21:28; Deut 32:10, 1 Sam 23:19, 23:24, 26:1, 26:3, Ps 68:7, 78:40, 106:14, 107:4, Isa 43:19, 43:20 (Ibid.).
[870] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 94.

### iii. חרב and חרבה

The verb חרב means ‘to be dry’. Further, חרב and its derivatives explain ‘the heat which causes the dryness’ and ‘the desolation of waste areas, the devastation caused by wars’.[871] Specifically, the derivative of interest is חרבה, which is translated as ‘ruins, waste or desolated places’. This term is found in stylistic connection with מדבר, to widen the semantic field to ‘aridity—wilderness—desert’.[872] However, חרב encompasses more than מדבר semantically, with its focus on geographical references.[873]

### iv. בקק

Fourth, another verb that appears in connection with the idea of wilderness is בקק. בקק means to lay waste, to devastate or make useless.[874] This term is used to describe those destructive forces that ruin, lay waste, trample, overthrow or exterminate. In the biblical text, the term is used in the Prophets to articulate the desolation of a country.[875]

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[871] Yamauchi, “Ḥārēḇ,” 318; See also, O. Kaiser, “Ḥāraḇ I,” ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David Green E., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 150–154.
[872] Talmon, “Miḏbār, ’Arāḇâ,” 94.
[873] A.R. Pete Diamond, “Ḥorba,” ed. Willem A VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 262–63.
[874] David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Beth-Waw*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 5.
[875] For example, Isa 24:1, 3; Jer 19:7, 51:2, and Hos 10:1 (A.H. Konkel, “Bqq,” ed. Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997], 705).

**v. תהו and בהו**

The noun תהו appears forty times in the OT. 'Since the word has no certain cognates in other languages, its meaning must be determined solely from its OT contexts'.[876] By its use within the OT תהו is used to describe places or things that are wasteland, wilderness, the empty place, nothingness, confusion, emptiness, futile and/or lifeless.[877] Like many of the other words I have been examining, תהו can be found connected with מדבר and ישימון, although there is no specific geographical reference. Instead, it emphasises 'an environment of mortal peril'.[878]

בהו is only used three times (Gen 1:2; Is 34:11; Jer 4:23) and all in conjunction with תהו. The meaning of בהו is unclear but generally in connection with תהו it is viewed as 'emptiness and void'. As a result, this hendiadys 'signifies the terrible, eerie, deserted wilderness, and this is a primary idea that functions in creation'.[879]

**vi. ציה and ציון**

The terms ציה and ציון refer to dryness, drought, desert or dry land. They are only found in the postexilic Prophetic and Poetic texts, and not in the Pentateuch or Historical Books (unlike מדבר or ערבה). The terms are not connected to a specific geographical landscape or found in construct with a geographical name, but refer to

[876] Ronald F. Youngblood, "tōhû," ed. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 964.
[877] See Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1st English ed., vol. 4 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 1689; M. Gorg, "Tōhû," ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David Green E. and Douglas W. Stott, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 568–570; Youngblood, "Tōhû," 964–965.
[878] Gorg, "Tōhû," 568.
[879] Köhler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 4:1689.

the characteristics of arid and desert-like regions.[880] Their use within postexilic texts draws upon the general imagery of arid places that wither in the heat (Is 25:5) and require rainfall or irrigation to yield fruit (32:2).[881]

### vii. שממה

The final term, שממה 'evokes only the negative aspect of מדבר in reference to devastation, through divine punishment, of settlements'.[882] In fact, שממה does not convey any of the 'historico-spatial' aspects of מדבר or any of its other positives aspects, such as drift land, a place for grazing, or 'a place of refuge, locus of theophany and of the covenant of God'.[883] The term שממה overlaps with הרב yet 'heat or dryness is not inherent in the root, but rather it describes the result of disaster and judgment'.[884] Overall, שממה conveys waste, ruin or uninhabitable land.

### viii. Summary

In summary, the biblical text has many different terms to describe 'wilderness' and its related semantic fields. The multiplicity of terms indicates the bearing of the wilderness as a geographical place within the OT. As expected, the wilderness and associated synonyms combine to describe a dry, barren and desolate place. Furthermore, the verb synonyms express the devastation, ruin and judgement that come, usually by the hand of God, to an otherwise domesticated and agricultural land.

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[880] G. Fleischer, "Ṣiyyâ; Ṣāyōn," ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 331.
[881] Ibid., 331.
[882] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 94.
[883] Ibid.
[884] Hermann J. Austel, "Šāmēm," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 936.

## B. WILDERNESS: THE GEOGRAPHY OF BIBLICAL PLACES

Second, to discuss the geographical dimension of the term מדבר, this section will provide an overview of five regions that the OT utilises to reference the Promised Land or its surroundings.[885] The five regions are: (a) the Asedot, which are the slopes of the Jordan depression, (b) the Southern Wilderness or Arabah, which is linked to the Jordan Valley depression and especially the Dead Sea, (c) the Judean Wilderness located between the Judean mountains and the Dead Sea, (d) the Negeb, which is located south of Beersheba and finally, (e) the Sinai desert.

### 1. The Asedot

First, the asedot are the desert slopes on the western side of the Jordan depression. This is the western area of the Moab and Edom mountain ranges, divided by the Arnon River gorge. The height of the Moab mountains, being higher than Judah's, are able to harness the rainfall. However, along their eastern rim, as it drops into the Jordan rift, the rainfall decreases. Similarly, the further south you proceed down the Edom mountain range, the less rain is received. At the southern end, the Edom mountains receive less than 2 inches of rain annually.[886] It is these eastern sides of the mountain ranges, beyond the plateau, that becomes desert. This is due to the plateau, which is comprised of 'sandstone gives way to Cenomanian limestone and finally Senonian chalk' on the eastern side.[887] The Arabah desert borders these desert slopes.

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[885] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 97.
[886] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 141–145.
[887] Ibid., 143.

**2. The Arabah or Southern Wilderness**

Second, the term ערבה is used both as a proper noun and a common noun (as previously seen) in the biblical text. As a proper noun, it is used to describe 'The Arabah', which refers to the Great Rift Valley in Israel. This area,

> can be divided into three distinct areas: the Jordan Valley, extending from the Sea of Chinnereth [Tiberas], including both sides of the Jordan River, to the Dead Sea; the region of the Dead Sea itself, including the desert wasteland on either side; and the modern Wadi el-'Arabah, which designates the region running from the southern end of the Dead Sea, slightly W and S to the Gulf of Aqaba.[888]

Geographically, the Arabah or Great Rift is located between the mountains of the Negeb and Edom. The Arabah 'has a flat and valley-like appearance', which ascends from the Dead Sea up to 1,160 feet above sea level, before descending back to sea level at Gulf of Eilat.[889] Immediately south of the Dead Sea, 'the Arabah is a severely desiccated badlands composed of marl and salt.'[890] This then changes to alluvial sand and gravel further south. The Arabah climate is hot with only sporadic rainfall, less than 2 inches per year. There are few springs that can support life in this area.[891] In correspondence with the Dead Sea location in this area, it is sometimes called the Sea of Arabah.

The area in the South is generally referred to as the Southern Desert and can be divided into three further areas. This includes the (1) Arabah, (2) Wilderness of Zin and (3) Wilderness of Paran. There is enough variation in their geography to review these areas individually.

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[888] Seely, "Arabah," 322.
[889] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 128.
[890] Ibid., 128.
[891] Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 33.

The Arabah of the Southern Desert refers to the desert valley from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea. It borders the Edom mountains of the east and the rising hills of the desert of the Wilderness of Zin and Paran on the west.[892] The Wilderness of Zin shares an eastern border with Edom across to Kadesh Barnea in the west, and the Negeb towards the north. At the south, it shares a boundary with the Wilderness of Paran. The Wilderness of Paran is located towards the south and extends to the traditional location of Mount Sinai.[893] The Wilderness of Zin is characterised by parallel ridges that run southwest to northeast, with the highest point being 3,396 feet above sea level. By contrast, the Wilderness of Paran is plateau-like in appearance and drained by various wadis. It is uniquely characterised by large craters called 'makheteshim'.[894] There is little vegetation in both of these areas due to little precipitation. The Wilderness of Zin receives less than 4-8 inches per year, and the Wilderness of Paran (moving further toward the south) even less; 1-2 inches per year.[895] Due to this very poor rainfall, grasses or any vegetation are rare and even nomadic flocks have trouble finding anything substantial to eat in these areas.

**3. The Judean Wilderness**

The Judean Wilderness is located on the eastern slopes of the Judean mountains. It covers an area approximately 16 km wide and 50 km long. This wilderness area is bordered in the south by the Negeb, in the north by the hill country of Ephraim, in the east by the Dead Sea and in the west by the 'demarcation between the hard Cenomanian limestone of the hill country of Judah and the softer Senonian chalk of

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[892] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 128.
[893] David R. Seely, "Zin, Wilderness of," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York; London: Doubleday, 1992), 1096.
[894] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 131.
[895] Ibid., 131.

the Wilderness of Judah'.[896] This mountainous Judean Wilderness is 'almost a complete desert because of the steep descent of more than 3,000 feet [900 m] over a distance of 10-15 miles [16-24 km]'.[897] Further, due to being situated on the lee side of the mountains, the Wilderness of Judah only receives 100-300 mm of rainfall a year, far less than those areas just a kilometre to the west. The effects of being in a rainfall shadow are also intensified by the geological composition of soft Senonian limestone, which cannot retain the moisture (although this geology contributes to flash flooding). It is also on the edge of any arable land. As a result of this geological-geographical location and composition, the Wilderness of Judah is used as pasture land for shepherds to graze their flocks, but only when the winter rains developed some greenery.[898] Agricultural life and shepherding are not a large part of Judean Wilderness lifestyle.[899] Specifically, 'the label the Wilderness of Judah is used only twice in biblical narrative (Judg 1:16; Matt 3:1) and once in the title of a psalm (Ps 63). Most commonly, it is simply referred to as "the wilderness"'.[900] Travel through this area was difficult due to the steep and rough terrain, combined with lack of water; thus, few settled here. Those who did choose to live here did so to find refuge and solace from the threats of society.[901]

**4. The Negeb**

The Negeb refers to the southern lands of Israel. Negeb is the Hebrew term for 'the dry' or 'dryness'. 'In biblical terminology *negeb* is often synonymous with *darom*,

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[896] Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., "Judah, Wilderness of," ed. David Freedman Noel, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1037.
[897] Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, trans. A.F. Rainey (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), 27.
[898] Ferris, Jr., "Judah, Wilderness of," 1037.
[899] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 83.
[900] Ferris, Jr., "Judah, Wilderness of," 1037.
[901] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 84.

that is, "south" or "southern direction"'.[902] The Negeb, thus, is apt in its description of the region that is located beyond the Hebron Hills, which is *dry* and *south.* It is the area that 'is a rough triangle with its E border running N from the Gulf of Aqaba/Eilat through the Arabah valley to the Dead Sea; its W border begins at the same point, running NW to Raphiah'.[903] It covers approximately 12000 square kilometres, (nearly half the area of modern Israel).[904] 'Topographically, the Negev is composed of low, round hills that are cut by shallow gullies and ravines of varying sizes. In the northern portion of the biblical Negeb, a larger basin has formed that houses the urban centres of Beersheba and Arad'.[905] This arid area is located between the 300 mm and 100 mm rainfall lines, (due to its location away from the Mediterranean Sea[906]) with less rainfall as you move south towards the Gulf of Aqaba. It is this climatic change that marks its border as the 'dryland' in the south.[907] It is also due to this climate that 'cultivation has never been consistent in the region'. [908] To understand this further, there are variations within the region itself. For example, in the loessial semi-arid plains of northern Negeb, which is above the 200 mm rainfall level, urban centres and villages can be found. At this level of rainfall, agricultural pursuits can be maintained. Whereas, further to the south in the arid degraded steppe of the Central Negeb Highlands, (with less than 150 mm of rainfall yearly), and the severe desert of the Southern Negeb (averaging less than 50 mm of rainfall per annum), high-yielding

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[902] Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, "Negeb (Iron Age)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1064.
[903] Steven A. Rosen, "Negeb (Bronze Age)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1061.
[904] J.M. Houston, "Negeb," ed. John Bimson, *Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Places: Towns & Cities, Countries & States, Archaeology & Topography* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House Co., 1995), 225.
[905] Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, 94.
[906] C. Nicholas Raphael, "Geography and the Bible," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 964–977.
[907] Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 23–24.
[908] Carl E. Armerding, "Negev (Negeb)," ed. Edward M. Blaiklock and R.K. Harrison, *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 335.

agriculture cannot occur but rather subsistence cultivation and shepherding, with an attendant nomadic lifestyle, are present.[909]

It is also important to note the strategic importance of the Negeb region. Due to its location in the south, the Negeb has acted as a landbridge for Israel. It has also been viewed as a buffer zone between the settled country in the north and the southern deserts of the Sinai and Negeb mountains.[910] Consequently, it designated the southern boundary of the Promised Land.[911] During Israel's history, the southern deserts would contain hostile warring tribes trying to push into the settled populations in the north.[912]

**5. The Sinai Desert**

Finally, in Sinai there are two basic regions – coastal and desert – due to it being a peninsula. '"A thousand square kilometres of nothing" is the description often given to the Sinai Peninsula. In fact, at first glance, Sinai seems to be a boundless moon landscape, arid and barren in its immense mountains, in its parched out "ouadi", in its stony stretches that have never known either man's labours or the presence of animals'.[913] The Sinai Peninsula is bordered by the Gulf of Suez in the west, and the Gulf of Aqaba and Negeb desert to the east. The great rift of the Aqaba continues into this area and has resulted in Sinai's unique landscape – great mountainous peaks including Jebel Musa, which reaches 2285 metres and Mount St Catherine, 2642

[909] Rosen, "Negeb (Bronze Age)," 1061.; Beit-Arieh, "Negeb (Iron Age)," 1064.
[910] Beit-Arieh, "Negeb (Iron Age)."
[911] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 98. Even though it is difficult to use wilderness areas to mark the national or political boundaries of a land, due to the 'drift' concept and the fluctuations that naturally occur (as compared to mountain ranges, seas, rivers), מדבר is used to designate the southern boundary of the land.
[912] Beit-Arieh, "Negeb (Iron Age)."
[913] Magi, *The Peninsula of Sinai*, 4.

metres, as well as volcanic rock strata, which contributes to its barren landscape.[914] The Sinai falls within the 'great arid belt' that crosses both Africa and Asia. This is especially apparent in the northern regions of Sinai in which sand dune and dry valleys are found. This aridity is further manifested by 'degraded soil surface, sand-dune expanses, salinization and dry water-courses'.[915] The Sinai has varying vegetation. In the south where there is little precipitation, metamorphic and igneous rocks are found, and the land is barren. In the central plateau and northern plains, desert detritus occurs. These areas include the stretches of alluvial soils and the dune complex of north-west Sinai.[916] Overall, the peninsula is marked by isolation, and whilst used by the Egyptians as a natural border and defence against warring tribes, it has stayed relatively unused throughout history,[917] predominantly due to its vast regions of rock and sand, limited water, heat and scattered vegetation.[918]

### 6. Summary of the Geography of the Wilderness

Although I have tried to capture the geographical characteristics of these wilderness areas within ancient Israel, it is difficult to be precise and exhaustive. As displayed 'Variations in annual rainfall, temporary expansion of agricultural activity into peripheral areas of the wilderness, or – vice versa – nomadic incursions into the

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[914] Ibid., 3.
[915] Fouad Iskandar, "Triangle of Grandeur," in *Sinai: The Site & the History: Essays*, ed. Gareth L. Steen and Anthony J. De Nigro (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 50.
[916] In the trek accounts of the wilderness, the wilderness in the south is divided into these regions: Desert of Shur, Desert of Sin, Wilderness of Paran, and Desert of Zin. Yet overall, these subregions are summarised by the comprehensive term Desert of Sinai. (Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 98.)
[917] Even so, in reference to the Sinai landscape El-Din comments, 'There is, no doubt, a strong relationship between geography and environment on one hand and traditions and culture on the other – each enforces certain behavioural attitudes'. Mursi Saad El-Din, "Introduction: The Splendor of Sinai," in *Sinai: The Site & the History: Essays*, ed. Gareth Steen L. and Anthony J. De Nigro (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 10.
[918] Iskandar, "Triangle of Grandeur," 58–59.

periphery of agricultural land all bring about ecological fluctuation'.[919] These elements all coalesce to characterise wilderness, although in different areas, these look slightly different. A quotation from Funk summarises this discussion well:

> Nevertheless, the localization of the wilderness as that of Judah and the lower Arabah of the Jordan valley does not rest finally on the parallelism between *miḏbār and arabah*. It is due rather to the appropriateness of the term *miḏbār* to the topography and climate of the area…The desert-dry area, moreover, covers the lower half of the [Rift] valley in the shape of an inverted-U, climbing the slope on the west until it rises nearly to Jerusalem; it embraces the whole of south Judah east of the central ridge. These eastern slopes of the Judean hills are composed largely of Senonian chalk which is extremely soft, easily eroded, and nearly infertile. The juxtaposition of sparse rainfall and this type of soil renders the term *miḏbār* particularly appropriate…. The wilderness, insofar as it is localized in Palestine, nearly always refers to this area of some portion thereof in the OT.[920]

Overall, understanding the geographical landscape of the ancient Israelite wilderness is important, due to the premise that location, geography and landscape can and does shape the identity of a nation, the culture of people-groups and characteristics of individual persons.[921] Thus, when this thesis unpacks specific biblical passages that refer to the wilderness, it is essential that not only the basics of the landscape be understood, but also the effects the setting has on the narrators, narratives and characters, as per Beck's methodology.

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[919] Talmon, "Miḏbār, 'Arāḇâ," 97.
[920] Funk, "The Wilderness," 208–209.
[921] Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 11-25. Hillel develops the premise that human culture is shaped by the environment. And the environment is not a passive stage. Indeed 'a society's interaction with the environment inevitably affects its values and attitudes–indeed, its whole worldview' (11).

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